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Oral History Interview: Edris H. Miller

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July 9, 1998
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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS WITH

MRS. EDRIS H. MILLER

June 9 and July 9, 1998

Bramwell, West Virginia

Interviewers: Rita Wicks-Nelson, Ph.D. and Ancella Radford Bickley, Ed.D.

Transcriptionist: Gina Kehali Kates

AB: We're at the home of Mrs. Edris Miller in Bramwell, WV, Ancella Bickley and Rita Wicks-Nelson recording.

RW-N: Are we set? (AB: I think so) Mrs. Miller, (EM: Yes) we're going to spend a lot of time with you and we hope that you will tell us as much as you feel comfortable about your life. And we don't really care how you tell it, in what order. What we do find that, it's sometimes easier for people to sort of begin at the beginning, and so, that might be easier for you, if you tell us about where you were born, tell us a little bit about your mother, father, your family, your childhood,and then we'll move on from there.

EM: I am Edris Henry Miller, and I was born in Bluefield, Virginia. My age, which I am real proud of at this present moment, I am seventy years old.

RW-N: Mrs. Miller, what was your birthdate? I think we may have it. . .

EM: November 9th, 19 hundred 27.

AB: Were your parents from Bluefield? I mean. . . .

EM: They were from Virginia.

AB: Were they born in Bluefield, Virginia?

EM: My father was born in Appomattox, Virginia. My mother was born in Bluefield, Virginia.

AB: And do you know how they got to Bluefield?

EM: Uh, coal mining. They, he, and his brothers, his family, moved to Bluefield, Virginia. He was a preacher, my grandfather. And so, as a result, he started pastoring churches in this area. And his family lived in Bluefield, Virginia.

AB: How many were there? How many children in his family? Did you-, did you know?

EM: In my father's family there were seven. (AB: Boys, girls, what?) All boys, one girl. (AB: Oh, my) One good daughter.

AB: And what about your mother's family?

EM: Uh, it was around thirteen of them.

AB: So you had lots of aunts and uncles. . .

EM: Lots. And believe it or not, I only have one uncle left living now. He's eighty. He was eighty two weeks ago.

AB: What about cousins?

EM: Plenty of cousins. Very few in this area now. Most of them are in Connecticut, New York, Baltimore. . .

AB: [laughter] She's from New York. [referring to RW-N] Do you. . .

EM: Maryland.

AB: . . . .do you all have family reunions?

EM: Yes, we have family reunion every two years.

AB: Do they come back to West Virginia.

EM: They come back here to West Virginia. They enjoy coming back home. They all, they were raised here in Bluefield. Some here, Bramwell; Coopers it was called them. And some in Bluefield, Virginia, and Tazewell, Virginia. So, as a result, they all enjoy coming back, coming home, is what they call it.

AB: And your father worked as a miner all of his life?

EM: He was a miner. My father died at an early age. He was a preacher as well. He pastored a

church in Hiawatha, West Virginia.

AB: Baptist?

EM: Baptist, yes.

AB: And where did you go to school, elementary school?

EM: Elementary school right up here. There was a school on top of this hill, right directly straight up from where I live.

RW-N: It's gone now?

EM: Oh, it's gone, it's been gone for years. One room school.

RW-N: Did it have a name?

EM: Yes, Coopers Grade School, Coopers.

RW-N: The whole town used to be called Coopers…?

EM: Coopers, the whole. . .

RW-N: C-o-o. . . .

EM: p-e-r-s. We still call it Coopers, this area. And our church is just over across the highway. You probably saw it when you pulled in at the garage. And it's Mill Creek Baptist church. And we still use the town as Coopers for that. Because the people that own the mines was Coopers. (RW-N: I see)

AB: Now, but, you were liv-, you were born in Bluefield, Virginia. How did your family get from Bluefield, Virginia, to Bramwell?

EM: My father got a job working for Mill Creek, which was just up this holler here, not too far. And then he moved to Coopers. (AB: And brought the family along with him) I was the only one then, I had been born, I was born in Bluefield, Virginia. All the rest of my sisters and brothers

were born here, Coopers.

AB: Uh, so the family came to, to Coopers. Did your mother work?

EM: Well, she did, they worked in uh, some. But not until after my father passed. She spent most of her time being a housewife and children.

AB: How many children were there?

EM: Was eight of us, four boys and four girls. And there was some that wasn't even. . . I have two sisters and it isn't even a whole year between the rest.

AB: So there were lots of babies? (EM: Lots of babies) And you were the oldest child?

EM: I'm the oldest child.

AB: Did that mean that you had to take responsibility for some of the others?

EM: I had, yes, [chuckling] I had that special privilege. When I was young, you didn't really call it a privilege. But you really, family were a lot different than what they are now. And of course, everybody had responsibilities and your chores and all those different things that you had to do to make the family go.

AB: Did you resent that?

EM: Well, not really, not really. Only when they was playing ball and I wanted to get out to play ball with the rest of the children. But, uh. . .

RW-N: Now, the house that you grew up in is very close to here, right?

EM: The house that I grew up in, that I lived in first, my son lives over there now, it's right over on the other side. . . the highway.

RW-N: So that house is still in your life?

EM: No, the one that we lived in most of the time burned down, on down the road a little bit.

AB: So uh, you all grew up here in Coopers and went to the school that was fairly close to your home. So you could walk to school?

EM: Walk, we walked, yes, we walked to the elementary.

AB: What grades were there?

EM: First through six.

AB: First through sixth, you had one teacher?

EM: One teacher.

AB: Do you remember teachers' names?

EM: Mr. Holcombe.

AB: Oh, a man teacher.

EM: A man teacher was my first teacher.

RW-N: Could you spell that for us?

EM: H-o-l-c-o-m-b-e, Holcombe.

AB: And from that school, where did you go?

EM: To Bluestone, Bramwell, Bramwell school, which is a mile down the road. You didn't pass it. You passed the uh, high school building. But you had come; no, you passed our school. . .if you came off of 52. You passed that school building. Doesn't look like much, like a school building now, with all the windows and everything out of it. But that is the-, but not the original. That was the new school that was built after I graduated.

AB: How, how many students were in that school when you went?

EM: In the neighborhood of about 300.

AB: And it went from what grades to what?

EM: Uh, eventually, at that time it was seven through twelve, because they had elementary schools in all the areas. (AB: Mm-hmm) Uhm, then it ended up being first through twelve.

AB: So, did they close Coopers then (EM: Yes. Oh yes), and they closed some of the elementary schools. Is that where Mr. Guyton was principal?

EM: Mr. Guyton was principal down there, and then he was principal at the school which was originally the white school on the hill. Either way you come in here, you pass one of the schools.

AB: Mm-hmm. And you graduated from that, from that high school (EM: I graduated) Bluestone (EM: Bluestone). And then what did you do?

EM: Went to college, Bluefield State.

RW-N: Right away?

EM: Uh, yes. [chuckles]

RW-N: And what year was that?

EM: In '44 I went to Bluefield State. And I graduated in 48. And uh, this past May, we uh, I have it here. . . our fifty year [inaudible]. . .

AB: Uh, Mrs. Miller is showing us a copy of the Bluefield State Commencement exercise for 1998. This was her fifty year anniversary in graduating from Bluefield State College. What made you decide to go to college, Mrs. Miller?

EM: Well, my parents sort of. . .my mom and my uncles and aunts. Uh, my dad died in '42. And uh, before he died, he told 'em to make sure that I got an education. And so, I really, at that time I wanted to be a beautician. So they said go get your education first. Then if you still want to be a beautician, you can. So after I finished, I never bothered. . . although I used to do my mom's hair and my sister's and different people's hair in the community. But I never went. . .

RW-N: So both of your parents encouraged you (EM: Yes), and you had aunts and uncles, too.

EM; Yes, very much so.

RW-N: Are any of them college educated?

EM: My uh, aunt on my daddy's side, my father's sister, she taught school, too.

AB: Here in this area?

EM: In Pocahontas, Virginia. She taught in the Virginias, real close there.

AB: Did she go to Bluefield State, too?

EM: Yes, she went to Bluefield State.

RW-N: And how far along in school did your mother and father go?

EM: Well, my mom went to Bluefield when it was called BI, Bluefield Institute. She went there and got what education she could. At that time, it wasn't a college. And they did their high school there.

RW-N: Oh, they did their high school there. One of the other women, I think, talked about that, too. So she finished high school.

EM: Because they couldn't finish high school in Virginia during those times. Not blacks.

RW-N: So, she essentially had a high school education, or some high school.

EM: Yeah, equal, equal to. . . (RW-N: And your dad?) My dad went to college some. And he was gifted with music. So, my grandfather sent him just to take music. And uh, like sight singing and ear training, all of that, you don't even really hear of it.

AB: Mm-hmm. So that was so he could help him in the ministry? Was that what your grandfather had in mind?

EM: Yes, yes.

AB: But uh, did your mother teach, or your father teach, or anything like that?

EM: No, no, no.

AB: Only the aunt in your family taught. What did you major in when you were in college?

EM: Elementary education.

AB: And did you work your way through, or were your parents able to support you through college or what?

EM: Well, it was only my mom then, uh, when I went to college. And she-, that's when she started. She was working then. And I had a job on the campus.

AB: What did you do?

EM: First I was doing-, cleaning bathrooms. Well, I couldn't take that one too long. [chuckle] So I went up and asked Mr.–what was the name? McKee–if they could find me another job. So, they did. I started waitin' tables in the dining room. And at that time, the tuition was only $26.52 a semester. And the room and board was $26 a month. So I worked, and my work paid for most of that.

AB: Did you work the whole four years?

EM: Yes.

AB: And uh, when you graduated, you did student teaching?

EM: Yes, I did my student teaching before I graduated.

AB: Uh-huh, okay. And where did you do that?

EM: At Lawson Street school, right there in Bluefield. We could walk from the college campus to the school. It's just beyond Park Street.

AB: And did you have an active social life when you were uh, in college? I mean, you were

working and going to class and all. Did you have time to socialize much?

EM: Yes, I socialized. And I played basketball–I loved it, I love it right now. [chuckle] And I played on the ball team, basketball team.

AB: Did you get home often?

EM: Ah, I'd come home on the weekends, sometimes. Fifty cents was hard to come by. That's what the bus fare was.

AB: So you could take a bus from Bluefield to Bramwell.

EM: Yes, right straight. And at that time, our house burn up, you see, in '44. And my mom moved to Freeman. And you pass right by that place where I lived then, comin' here today.

AB: So by that time your dad had passed (EM: Yes, oh, yes, he died in '42) and you had, you had younger brothers and sisters still at home?

EM: All of them, yes, indeed.

AB: So your mom was working and managing the children at home, as well?

EM: And did a wonderful job. I can't. . . honestly. . . altogether different from how she made it and raised all of us, eight of us. I was, I hadn't turned thirteen when my father died. And there was eight of us under that age. And how she. . .

RW-N: Tell us about that. How did she do it?

EM: Just a mystery. The Lord, one thing. She was a very good Christian. And I can remember one time when she-, we just had one chicken. And she prayed and blessed that and she said, "Lord, I'm doing the best that I can." And that's when I really began to understand, you know, the mysteries and how wonderful the Lord is, because we all ate and we were full. We got up and played, and it was still a lot of chicken left on the table.

AB: Did you all garden or. . .

EM: Yes. And we had gardens when we lived up here, all, that whole hillside, all the way around. Each family had a space, certain space.

AB: Did you all live in company houses?

EM: Yes, all of these were company houses, both sides.

AB: Uhm, did any of the other, your brothers and sisters, go to Bluefield State, too?

EM: Uhm, I had one to go for a while. But none of the rest of them finished.

RW-N: Why do you think that was the case?

EM: Why they didn't finish? (RW-N: Yeah) Well, my youngest sister. . .

RW-N: I guess it was different for different [inaudible].

EM: Different uh, right. Well, a couple of them didn't even really want to go. I guess they had other things, you know, they wanted to do. And uh, my baby sister went to Bluefield State. She almost finished. But at that time, I had two sisters living in Connecticut. And she wanted to go up there. You know how some young people are. So uh. . . .

RW-N: Did you want to go to college? I know you wanted to be a beautician. (EM: Yes) Uh, but when your family said, "Go to Bluefield," how did you respond to that?

EM: Well, I wanted to go. (RW-N: You did want to go?) I really did.

RW-N: So, unlike some of your brothers and sisters, you wanted to go and finish? And liked it there?

EM: I loved it.

RW-N: You loved it there.

EM: Yes, indeed. It was. . .just wonderful. I really enjoyed it.

RW-N: Do you remember any special teachers there, that were special to you?

EM: Oh, yes. Several of them. My field was elementary education. But we had a wonderful chemistry teacher in high school. And you had to learn the valences, the chemicals, their symbols and everything. We-, I had such a good background in chemistry, that I took that as an elective. And Mr. Dunlap was uh, my teacher, and he says uh, he'd call for those symbols and all that, formulas, and I'd raise my hand up. I didn't have to study for that one. [chuckle]

RW-N: Who was this teacher in high school? Do you remember his name?

EM: Anderson, Douglas Anderson.

AB: Oh, I know Doug Anderson. . . .Amanda.

EM: Amanda, yes, yes, indeed. He'd, I mean, when he'd hit the door, books closed. You had to study it. And uh, the books stayed closed the whole time. So you had to learn it, if you wanted to pass.

RW-N: How did you manage that, when you were finishing up high school, your dad had died, your mother, you had a lot of kids in the family, I would imagine that the house-, things, a lot of things, were going on in the house. How did you manage to study and get that work done?

EM: I stayed, I stayed on the campus. (RW-N: When you were at Bluefield?) Yes, when I was at Bluefield State.

RW-N: How about in high school?

EM: Well, we all just, after you finished your work, you got your lessons done.

RW-N: So when you came home, you had some chores to do. . . (EM: Yes, all of us) and then you had to do your lessons?

EM: Mostly the older ones. You know, the smaller ones didn't have to, but we had to.

RW-N: Right. Yes.

AB: Now, when you went to high school, now you had to go by bus, is that right?

EM: Yes, yes.

AB: So you'd go in, what time in the morning?

EM: I think we got to school in the neighborhood of about 8, near 8 o'clock.

AB: Did you have chores to do before you went to school?

EM: I've had to wash dishes a many mornings before I went to school. Yes, indeed. I mopped the kitchen. The kitchen floor was-, the kitchen was real small, right over on the other side. And I've had to mop it sometimes. You'd be surprised at eight children in the house running around.

AB: Just thinking about doing the laundry or cooking for eight children.

EM: Now, we didn't have to do that. My mom washed, did the laundry, and cooking. Then as we became older, she taught us how to cook.

AB: Uh, you were growing up during World War II. Do you have any memories at all of the war?

EM: Yes. We didn't have a football team one year because there was not enough male on the campus to have a football team.

AB: That was after you went to Bluefield State?

EM: Bluefield State. I can remember that real well. . . because of the war.

AB: What about. . . did you know anybody yourself, or any of the people from this community in the, in the service?

EM: Well, a lot of the people, male and some, there was a couple of female families, where the sisters joined. . .

RW-N: You had no brothers or sisters in the service?

EM: Oh, most of my brothers was in the service.

RW-N: During the war?

EM: Not during the war.

AB: They would have been too young.

EM: Uh-huh, they were too young. They were too young. But uh, I had two brothers that was in the service. And he was in Germany a lot of the time, and three of his children, when they came back, spoke German, just like we speak English. Fluently. I mean, just real good.

RW-N: Do you remember during World War II, being-,having food stamps or anything like that?

AB: Rationing. . . ?

EM: Rationing. I can remember the rationing. And I can remember uh. . . not recession they called it. . . uh, depression, depression. (AB: You remember The Depression?) Yes. We would go over, we would go over well, not too far from here. 'Cause the roads have changed. And the truck would come and bring butter and I can remember [inaudible] flour, all those kinds of commodities and cheese.

RW-N: Do you remember those-, that those were hard years?

EM: Well. . . actually, it's. . . what I'm saying is, someone else providing for you (RW-N: Yes, yes) and they made sure you had something (RW-N: Yes) to eat. So it wouldn't seem as hard as it would to someone that had nothing. And my grandfather on my mother's side, had a store in Bluefield, Virginia. He was a slave. And uh, when he left, those people set him up in business. So, he had this. . .

AB: You mean when the war was over and he was freed? (EM: Yes)

RW-N: Now this is your mother's. . .

EM: On my mother's parents. . .

RW-N: . . . .your mother's, your mother's. . .

EM: Father.

AB: What was his name?

EM: Charles Robinson.

AB: Charles Robinson. And he was a slave.

EM: He was a slave.

RW-N: In Virginia, right?

EM: In Virginia, exactly.

AB: Did your mother ever tell you any stories that he told her or so, about being a slave?

EM: Yes, she told us several. And he would tell us, too.

AB: Did you know him?

EM: My grandfa-, yeah, oh, Lord, yes! He, he was ninety-seven when he passed. And one of 'em, his sister's, my aunt said he was a hundred and four. Oh, yes. I would go up. . .

AB: Would you tell us one of the stories he told?

EM: Why, he would tell about how they used to go and uh, out in the field. And they couldn't have service or anything there around the plantation. . .

AB: This is the church services?

EM: And they would go out in the field and uh, how they would have their services and singing and all. And when the old masters would come, catch them, they would start to work hoeing and working the field. [chuckle]

AB: Did, did he ever say what the name of the people was that uh. . .

Em: No, I don't remember that. But I'm going to ask my uncle. I have one uncle left. I'm going to ask him; he knows.

AB: When your grandfather talked about that, did he seem bitter or angry or so, as he remembered those days?

EM: No, he didn't seem to be bitter or angry about it. If he did, he didn't show it.

RW-N: So when he became free, the people, his masters, set him up in business?

EM: Set him up in business.

RW-N: And that was where?

EM: Moved his family.

RW-N: Moved his family.

EM: To Bluefield, Virginia.

RW-N: I see, okay. And what kind of business was that?

EM: Wholesale food.

AB: And so, when, during The Depression when times were hard for your family, did he help you all out with food from the store?

EM: Oh, yeah, yes, he would come down and bring a lot of people, all along the road. Horses, he had horses and wagons, buggy, all that stuff. And he would bring people, well, that ended his business when that was all over, because the people didn't pay him back. So, that no longer . . .

RW-N: And what did you know about your mother's mother? Your grandmother?

EM: Oh, I knew my grandmother for a long, long, long time, because uh, when she had a stroke and each one of the sisters would keep her for a good while. So she lived with us for awhile.

AB: I take it she was not a slave, uh, it was just him.

EM: No, just him.

RW-N: Do you know anything about her family? (EM: Uhm. . .) She came from here, you said, right?

EM: My grandmother (RW-N: Yes), she came from Virginia, too.

RW-N: She came from Virginia, too. Do you know anything about what her family did?

EM: Uh, no, I really don't. (AB: So. . .) No more than just farming, you know, just regular. . .

RW-N: Do you know if they owned their own farm?

EM: I don't think so, I don't think so. But I wouldn't really say.

AB: So you grew up and the war comes and other than the shortages and the fellows going off, you don't have many memories of World War II, beyond those things?

EM: Not too much, not, not too much. I just remember the rationing, how, you know, shortages of things. We'd take food stamps, not stamps, ration stamps (RW-N: Yeah) to the store to buy some things and all. And meat, you had certain times that you could get meat. Other times, none. I remember that.

AB: When, when you were growing up here in this area, what did you do for a social life?

EM: Well, there wasn't. . . other than playing, you know, with the children and all.

RW-N: Do you remember some of the games you used to play?

EM: We played everything, like hopscotch and ball, crochet, games like that. (AB: Did the church. . .) And dance. [chuckle]

AB: Did the church have activities for young people?

EM: Not too many. But they had some. They had BYPU, and most of them was like Bible

games, and games on that order.

RW-N: Okay, BYPU (AB: Baptist Young People's Union).

AB: Uh, what about the school? Were there any activities? Did you get to be in plays or anything like that?

EM: Oh, Lord, Yes, yes, we had plays and spelling bees and all those kinds of things at school, in elementary, as well as high school.

AB: When, in the plays, what kind of plays did you have?

EM: Uh, those operettas. . .

AB: With crepe paper dresses?

EM: Yes. [laughing] Operettas, believe it or not.

AB: What about the movies? Did you get to go to the movies?

EM: Oh, yes, we got to go to the movies, right next door to where you stopped to find out; that was the theater. [Mrs. Miller refers to the place where interviewers had stopped for directions to her house].

AB: Near the post office.

EM: Near the post office.

RW-N: In Bramwell.

EM: In Bramwell.

AB: Was it segregated?

EM: Yes, yes, it was segregated. They had a little place up in the balcony for blacks. Then, after years, it opened up.

AB: What about medical care? If you were sick or needed a dentist or something, how was that

managed?

EM: Well, back then the company provided everything the coal miner needed. And as a result, the doctor had his doctor's office down in the bottom of the store. And the doctor was there, and he-, they made house visits.

AB: Is that the dentist, too?

EM: Uh, no. Now they had, uh, we'd have to go to the dentist.

AB: Were these white doctors or black doctors?

EM: White, white.

AB: Well, suppose you had to go to the hospital. Where'd you go?

EM: Bluefield, they called it Bluefield Sanitarium then.

AB: Black hospital or white hospital?

EM: Well, they had a black hospital, too, Brown's, in Bluefield. But at first, there was a side for the black, then a side for the white. . . in the Bluefield Sanitarium. The big hospital.

AB: Suppose somebody died. Who handled the funeral?

EM: Why, they had black morticians, the same for-, and the coal companies had a mortician, had a company as well.

AB: A black one?

EM: No, no, they were white.

AB: Would they handle black bodies?

EM: They would handle them. They've always handled a lot of the black bodies. But a lot of the people preferred the black morticians.

AB: Uh, your mother uh, did your mother-, when did your mother pass?

EM: In uh, '63.

AB: So she lived quite a while after your father did? (EM: Yes, yes, she did) And did she maintain her own home?

EM: Yeah, this is where she lived.

AB: She lived here.

EM: [inaudible word] Yes, mm-hmm.

AB: And she was able to care for herself and all, or did you live with her or what?

EM: Well, long toward the last, I moved over here to live with her. Because I couldn't get her to come over and live with me. So, so that I could take care of her and care for her.

RW-N: How old was she when she passed?

EM: She was fifty-six.

AB: Oh, that's young.

EM: Yeah, very young.

RW-N: Was your father young, too?

EM: He was thirty-eight when he passed.

RW-N: And was that from illness at that age?

EM: Well, he had a heart condition. He'd work in the mines and then. . .they said he really didn't sleep like he should have. He'd come right out of the mines, and of course, he had about four or five different choirs. Different areas. It was something going on all the time. If he wasn't preaching, he was [inaudible] choirs. The choirs would be going to other churches to serve in it and all.

RW-N: So when he passed, that was not only a loss for your family, but for a lot of the churches

he pastored?

EM: A lot of. The choirs, as well.

AB: What do you remember most about your mother?

EM: That beautiful smile and how nice and how sweet she was. . .to everybody, regardless to how life was.

AB: She was an important influence in your life?

EM: Yes, very much so.

AB: And with your brothers and sisters as well?

EM: With all of us.

RW-N: What do you remember about your father?

EM: Uh, I remember mostly uh, my mom always did the discipline. [chuckles] Because they would go to work sunrise, before, you know, daylight. And it would be almost dark when they'd come in. Uh, he, my mom was very strict, and he would always say, "Oh, don't whip them." [laughing] We could get off easy.

AB: Your mom never married again?

EM: Yes, she married again. (AB: Did she?) She married a few years before she passed.

AB: And what of your step-father? Uh, did you know him? I mean, you were an adult by that time.

EM: Yes, I was an adul-, I was older, much older then. And uh, she was probably married to him, I'd say about eight years before he passed. (AB: So he passed before she did?) He passed before she did.

AB: Uh-huh. So, when you graduated from Bluefield State, what'd you do?

EM: Uh. . . what did I do? I married that December. [chuckle] That was one thing.

AB: And you had met your new husband at Bluefield State, or where?

EM: No, they lived next door. Uh. . .they didn't-, he didn't live, his grandparents lived next door to us, right over across the highway over there. Coopers. But he lived at Spragues, West Virginia. But they would always come up and visit. Now, he was in the service during that time when I was in college. And uh, I can remember when he tried to get me to go down there. My mom says, "No, you're gonna finish school." [chuckle] So, uh, to the base, you know. So. . . .

AB: So he was in the service when you married?

EM: No, he was out when we were married.

AB: Oh, he, mm-hmm.

RW-N: But before you married.

EM: Before we married, while I was in Bluefield State.

RW-N: He wanted you to marry him earlier, or. . . ? (EM: Yeah) To quit school. And your mother said (EM: No, no, no, no, no) no. Did you want to do that?

EM: Not really, not really. I didn't want to leave home.

AB: Where did you get married, do you remember?

EM: Yes. Down at Freeman, West Virginia. Uh, Reverend David Stewart married us.

AB: Were you in the pastor's study, or church?

EM: In his home.

AB: In the pastor's home. (EM: Pastor's home) So, just the two of you there, or was there anybody else there with you?

EM: Uh, his wife, the pastor's wife.

AB: And uh, so you got married in December, and where did you all live when you married?

EM: Then we moved back to Coopers to one of the houses. He, my husband, already had, he had his mother live with them, and his sister, in one of the houses on the other side. So that's where I moved to. Back up here again. [chuckle]

AB: So, did you go to work then?

EMM: I worked for some people that lived over near the company store, uh, once or twice a week, sometimes. Sometimes babysitted. Uh, then when the mines started cutting off–my husband worked in the mines at that time–and they got cut off. So, we sent applications in at the Greenbrier and we both worked over there for a good while. Then when my daughter was born, uh, I says, "I'm not leaving her." I had left, was working over there when my second child was born. And uh, my parents, my mom and my step-father spoiled him so that when I would come home, he cried to come over here, and not stay with me. So, when the third one was born, I said, "I'm not leaving this one." And I was hired to teach during that same time.

AB: So, so you married and uh, you and your husband went off to, after the mines closed, to the Greenbrier. How long did you stay over there?

EM: I worked over there in the neighborhood of about eight, ten years.

AB: Oh, you were there a long time.

RW-N: Both of you worked there?

EM: Both. He worked two different times. He worked, and then got a job at the bus terminal in Bluefield.

RW-N: And what were you doing there?

EM: I was a maid.

RW-N: And he was doing. . . ?

EM: Uh, bell, bellman. He was the bellman.

AB: And you lived there in White Sulphur.

EM: On the place, mm-hmm. (AB: On the place) They had quarters, living quarters for the employees.

RW-N: Was that a quite decent job at the time?

EM: Yes, it was a great time, we thought. [chuckle]

RW-N: It was a good time?

EM: Yeah, they always provided plenty of activities and everything for their employees.

AB: But your children stayed with your mother?

EM: With my mother.

AB: So, you came back to Bramwell. You had three children now, and you got a job teaching. (EM: Yes) Where were you teaching?

EM: Right at Bluestone. And I, it was the school that you passed.

AB: By this time, they had become one through twelve?

EM: Yes, yes.

AB: And what grade did you teach?

EM: I taught first grade, for about ten years.

RW-N: Now, let's see, we're talking about 1950-, (EM: '59) '59.

EM: See, I started that September of '59.

RW-N: Had you looked for a teaching job wen you first got out of school?

EM: Oh, I had tried several times. But it was really hard.

RW-N: Now this was, you graduated from Bluefield in forty- (EM: '48) eight. And there were just no jobs available?

EM: Well. . . .

RW-N: Or you had to know somebody to get on.

EM: That's it. [laughs] Yes.

RW-N: So there were limited jobs. I mean, more people wanted them.

EM: There was plenty people out there. And uh, it was hard.

AB: Did you ever think of going away to get a job? Going to Virginia or some place like that?

EM: Well, my aunt that taught school, uh, did. She, we filled out all kinds of applications. And I got a job in Culpepper, and I didn't want to leave home. So, she thought I was in Culpepper and I was here. [chuckle] I didn't. . . (RW-N: You just didn't want to go) . . . didn't want to go.

RW-N: Of course, you already were married at that time?

EM: Well, yes, mm-hmm.

RW-N: And you tried a few other times, as the years went by, or did you just settle into the Greenbrier and. . .?

EM: Well, I still-, I kept trying. (RW-N: Kept trying) Kept trying. And finally, my mom carried me over to the board of education's office. And of course, at that time, politics was. . . that was. . .I don't know if I should say that or not, but (AB: Sure you should) [laughing] it was just who you were and [inaudible]

RW-N: So your mother had some influence?

EM: Yes, she went over and she talked to the superintendent and told him how long I had been out of school. And uh, he - she sure would appreciate him uh, trying to find a job for me.

RW-N: Did she have any special influence? Was she into politics?

EM: No, she wasn't into politics like that, no. But uh, she did have a lot of influence in the community. A lot of the children and people called her 'mom'. And uh. . .

RW-N: So her influence in the community came from. . . being a working mother, with a family and. . . . But there were probably a lot of working mothers with families. What made her special that she had that kind of influence?

EM: She, it was her ability to speak in churches and different places.

RW-N: So she was a community leader, in some ways (EM: Yes) in some ways. (EM: Yes, she was) In informal settings. And you think the superintendent of schools recognized that?

EM: I really believe. You had to have something, other than just yourself, you know.

AB: How did you keep your uh, teaching certificate up during those years? Because they used to be. . .

EM: I had it renewed every five years.

AB: Did you have to take courses or so, to renew it?

EM: In six hours, every five years, and kept my certificate renewed. And finally (AB: Now how did you. . .) I got the uh, permanent.

AB: How'd you manage that while you were working at the Greenbrier?

EM: Uh, I'd come in the summer. I would take classes, like I finished in '48, you know, five years, '53. Uhm, that year, I, my husband was still working in the mines when I went to summer school that first five years. And uh, I went. . . . But the other times, he wasn't working in the mines then. But I managed. I still wasn't working, teaching, you know.

RW-N: When you uh, when you worked at the Greenbrier, where did you live?

EM: They had quarters for all the employees.

RW-N: You lived right on the grounds there, right. Yes.

EM: On the grounds, yeah.

AB: But that, so you were always optimistic about getting a job teaching because you kept that teaching certificate.

EM: Yes, I kept going. Determined. [chuckle] Oh, yes.

AB: Did you have more children? You, you mentioned three. Your oldest child is a boy?

EM: Boy. The next one was a boy, and the baby was a girl.

AB: So, you just have the three? (EM: Three)

RW-N: Can you give us their names and the dates they were born?

EM: Uh, Oscar was born in July, 1949, Karen (RW-N: Did you say Oscar?) Oscar, mm-hmm. And Carl was born August the 24th in '55. Karen was born February 19th, '59.

AB: And are they here in this area?

EM: Now, Carl lives uh, off and on. He's married. He lives in Norfolk. But he's, music and playing inclined, so he comes up, lives over there at our house and does his music. Not lives, but he comes up all the time.

RW-N: What does he do when you say he does his music?

EM: Ah, he plays and sings and he and his wife and taping and all those kinds of things. And he does tapes for other people, a lot of churches that don't have choirs, they come and get him to tape-, make tapes so they can have music, to accompany their singing.

AB: And your other son?

EM: He's, well, he's in Beckley.

AB: And your daughter?

EM: She's, she lives with me.

RW-N: I think I've talked to her on the phone.

EM: Yes. And she teaches.

RW-N: So, did any of your children go to Bluefield State?

EM: They, well, they all went. But uh, my oldest son went in the service and so did Carl, before they finished. They never bothered to. . .

RW-N: So Karen finished there. (EM: Karen finished) And she teaches school now. (EM: Yes) Where does she teach?

EM: At Princeton. And she coaches Pikeview girls basketball team.

RW-N: And she's teaching what grade?

EM: She teaches junior high. She's in uh, handicap, teaches handicapped students.

AB: Do you have any grandchildren?

EM: Well, I didn't really have any. Then when Carl married, I have about eight or ten now. [chuckling] I didn't think I would ever have any. Now. . .Christmas time is something else.

AB: I can imagine, if you have eight.

EM: So, you can always say, "Well, I'll be glad when I get some." And when they come in abundance like that. . . [laughing] But still, we have plenty of fun. I enjoy them.

AB: So you got your teaching job you say in 1959 at Bluestone. Is that right? (EM: At Bramwell) At Bramwell. And how long did you teach there?

EM: I taught ten years, first grade. Then they integrated. So I went up on the hill to the other school. I was the first black teacher moved up there.

RW-N: What year was that? Do you remember?

EM: Uhm, it had to have been about '69, '68 or '69. (RW-N: That's really late)

AB: You mean the schools were that slow in integrating (EM: Slow), from 1954 to 1969?

EM: Well, see, here's what they did. They started with 10th, 11th and 12. And then (RW-N: Worked down) worked it on.

END OF TAPE 1 - SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 1 - SIDE 2

RW-N: What I was asking you is, I was a little bit confused. You said you worked at Bluestone. But that's the name of the school. Is that right? Or am I confused about that?

EM: That's the name of the school, yes.

RW-N: And it was in the town of Bramwell?

EM: Bramwell.

RW-N: Okay. And then when integration came, you went to what school?

EM: Bramwell school.

RW-N: And that was. . . what level school was that? Junior high?

EM: I taught first grade.

RW-N: You taught first grade. Yes, of course. How were you selected to go to that? Was that a white school you were going to? (EM: Yes, a white school) So, how did they integrate? Did they. . .can you explain how that happened?

EM: They got the first grades first. They'd already started integratin' tenth, high school. And then uh, they still had same grades down at the other school. But they had to have some black teachers up there as well. So I was the first one to go on.

AB: So the black school continued to operate, although, uh, integration had occurred? (EM: Right) Did they, did some of the black students go also, when you went, or were you just a black teacher there and without the students? I mean, did the students stay at the black school?

EM: Some, some stayed. But the first grade went up on the hill, as well.

AB: Mm-hmm. So the first grade was fully integrated. And they closed it out down at the other school?

EM: Down for awhile. And then, uh, after awhile the enrollment was so high that they had to use both schools.

RW-N: But there were now integrated, first grades? (EM: Yes, yes) Did any of the white teachers go into the black schools?

EM: Well, that's what they had to do, put some in both, yes.

RW-N: And were people just assigned to do that, or did they, the teachers-, did they volunteer or was it just based on the grade?

EM: No, they didn't volunteer. [chuckles] Life wasn't. . . [laughter]

RW-N: Life wasn't that democratic, huh? (EM: No) How did you feel about that?

EM: Well, uh, it really didn't bother me. It was different. But uh. . .

AB: Different in what respect, Mrs. Miller?

EM: Well, when you've been used to your own people and their ways and everything. And then when you move to another school or to any situation. . . .

RW-N: You were the only black teacher there? (EM: At first) And you had some black students. . . .(EM: In elementary). . . in elementary, yes.

EM: So uh. . .but our lives. . .

RW-N: How did, how did that go for you? As we have talked with other women, we have asked them about their experiences. Because almost all of them we've talked with started out in segregated schools, (EM: Right) and then had to make this transition. How did that go for you? I mean, what was the good part of it for you, and what was the not so good part of it for you?

EM: Well, the social part of it wasn't what it was when you know everybody and you understand, you know, the way of life and you're used to communicating differently.

AB: How did the students and teachers, white teachers and white students, receive you?

EM: Well, they did, they really did. I think they went overboard trying to make sure that, you know, nothing happened.

RW-N: Have any difficulties with the students?

EM: Uh, one or two. . .

RW-N: Because they were little ones, right?

EM: . . . they were small, the had [inaudible] small children.

AB: What about the parents?

EM: Well, at first, they really didn't accept. But later on, they found out that we could do just as good of a job as anybody else or better.

RW-N: How did that come out, when you say they didn't accept it? How did that come out? How did you see that? How did you know that?

EM: You could tell from the expressions, the way. . .

RW-N: It was the way they were interacting with you (EM: Yes) that you, that you didn't feel comfortable all the time. Did they say anything to you ever about it?

EM: No, no, no, but you could tell. You could easily tell.

AB: Was there ever any name calling or anything like that?

EM: Uh, where adults are concerned? (AB: Or children) Or children. . .oh, yes, with some children.

AB: From chil-, I mean, from child to child, not from child to teacher. I mean, they didn't say. . .

EM: Right, right. From child to-, right, from child to child. Name calling, um. . . . (AB: What did you do about that?) Well, I always had a good little thing that I-, all those good things I say came from God, you know. The best things to say in situations like that. I, it worked for me. I always told them, "Well, don't you stoop that low to call them a name." I said, "All these names, you get the dictionary and you look them up. Everybody's got a nickname. So, you just don't stoop and don't call back." And it, it worked, it really worked. And when I said all races have nicknames . . . so, but you don't stoop to call them by their nickname, you respect people. And it worked! It worked wonders.

RW-N: So then eventually, more and more teachers, more black teachers, came with you to (EM: Yes) and that was. . .

EM: Eventually the whole. . .

RW-N: Yes. And that was easier for you, then, I assume, (EM: Much easier) I mean, socially. . .

EM: Socially and in all ways.

RW-N: Do you think that when you first went into the white schools that parents did not consider you up to the job?

EM: Well, some.

RW-N: But not all?

EM: Not all. No, no, no, no, no, not–the majority was the other way.

AB: What about your relationship with your principal? Do you think that was-, was that supportive?

EM: Very good, supportive; he was very, very good principal.

AB: Well, what do you. . . ?

EM: Understanding.

AB: What do you think were the differences between the black schools that you worked in and the white schools that you came to work in?

EM: Well, there was always much more to work with in the white schools. (AB: You mean in terms of supplies?) Supplies and everything.

RW-N: Had you been aware of that before you went into the white school?

EM: Well, yes, my mom, she was custodian up there for awhile. And she told me, that not only with the supplies and everything, but the teachers made more, as well. (AB: In terms of their pay?) Pay.

RW-N: What happened to those pay raises? When you went, when you were integrated, did everybody then get the same pay?

EM: Yeah, same, they started-, they had to.

AB: As you look back on that whole process of integration from this distance, how do you feel about it?

EM: As I look back, the way I feel now, uh. . . I would say integration was all right. But I still feel like that our children got more in their own schools, segregated schools . . .than (AB: What, what do you mean?) integration could afford them.

AB: What, what was it that they got?

EM: Everything. They really cared, the teachers cared, and they saw to it that they really did the work. And it seems like, there's some difference from the other.

AB: So going into a school where there were, the supplies were better and what-not, didn't help matters?

EM: Uh, it helped if you wanted to make it work. But there were cases where uh, our children, regardless as to the ages and the grades, there was always some kind of way that, in the process of elimination, I'll say it like that.

RW-N: So there wasn't the uh, the care put into each child. Is that when they went into the other schools? And is that mostly by the white teachers?

EM: Uh. . . not 100%. We had some (RW-N: Yeah, uh-huh, yes) both.

RW-N: But they got kind of lost in the shuffle, the kids, when they went into [inaudible] schools?

EM: Yes. I really, I really feel like a lot of them did. And then a lot of them that had parents that was determined to push them and to encourage them, they went far. But then there's so many children where parents don't even know they even went to school.

RW-N: Yeah, so they were really lost then.(EM: Lost) because the teachers weren't doing it for them as much.

EM: Makes a difference.

AB: And how long did you teach in that school, Mrs. Miller?

EM: Well, I did all of my teaching here in the Bramwell area. I taught thirty-two years in all.

RW-N: In those two schools?

EM: Those two schools.

AB: And what year did you retire?

EM: In '90-, I have to count sometimes, '91, '92, '92 school year.

AB: That hasn't been that long, hasn't been that long ago.

EM: No.

AB: That you retired. Had you seen any change in the students by the time you retired?

EM: In which way?

AB: Well, any way at all. I mean, were the kids the same kinds of kids that you used to teach when you first started?

EM: Well, the children have changed; their ways and their lives are altogether different from back when I first started teaching. Everybody had to respect, regardless, to what school that you was in. And then it got so that it changed.

RW-N: So there's not. . .

EM: Children, people, the world. [chuckle]

RW-N: Do you think it was harder to teach in these later years than in the earlier years because of those changes?

EM: Yes, yes, I really do.

RW-N: Did you have more discipline problems?

EM: I never had too many.

RW-N: I don't mean you, but I mean, in general in the school?

EM: Uh. . . (RW-N: Do you think it was harder to manage kids?) . . . well, some, some, some children. But I don't think it was like it now, though.

RW-N: You think it's even gotten worse?

EM: Yes. I really do.

AB: What about the-, we were talking earlier about the participation in activities at the schools, the operettas and what-not, were those kinds of things available to the black kids after the schools were integrated?

EM: Uh. . . yes, to some–some children. One or two or three maybe, got an opportunity to do speaking parts and have main parts. But in the black school, all children participated. Same way it is with sports and everything else. Valedictorians and salutatorians. I don't care how smart you are. Uh. . . it just doesn't add up and measure up the way it should. But in some schools in McDowell County, uh, they really do; they added two and two, the four. Uh, and irregardless to who that person is, they become valedictorian.

AB: But that didn't always happen over here?

EM: No.

RW-N: So you really see a difference between the counties (EM: Yes) in that way? (EM: Oh, yes) Why do you think that, that difference existed?

EM: Ah. . . well, let me see. [chuckle] I don't want to, my daughter teaches, so therefore, [chuckles] . . .

RW-N: Did it have to do more with administration?

EM: I would want that said.

AB: I notice, of you speaking of your daughter. I see a lot of trophies in your living room, uh, Mrs. Miller. Are these trophies that, that uh, your kids have won, or you have won? Or what?

EM: My daughter-, those are my trophies and my daughter's trophies. She-, if you see the bowling ones, they're mine; I bowl, I love bowling, too. I, the ball, baseball bat, basketball, those are my daughter's. But the, all the bowling ones are mine.

RW-N: So, there's some athletic ability in this family.

EM: Well, all of my children played basketball.

RW-N: And there's some music a-, music ability.

EM: Music. But it really passed all eight of us, and my son is just like my father.

RW-N: So . . . oh, so, you and your siblings, none of you were-, your brothers and sisters, none of you were into music that much?

EM: We were in the school choirs and things like that. But no, not like he is.

RW-N: But your son has greater talent.

EM: Greater. He's gifted.

RW-N: By the way, uh, for the sake of the tape, the trophihes are all on top of a piano, so someone is. . .a musician.

EM: [laughing] Well, I play a little bit. But nothing like my son and my father.

AB: You said that both your grandfather and your father were ministers. (EM: Ministers, yes) Uh, so, the church then, I guess has played an important role in your life?

EM: Well, it has. It really, all my life I might say. I started school when I was–I should have told [inaudible]. . . when I was three years old. I cried and pitched a fit to go to school. Well, they thought-, I lived on the other side over there–they thought that it was because all the children were gone that I played with. And uh, my dad carried me up on his shoulder up on the hill. And he told the teacher, "Mr. Holcombe," he says, "This girl's about to drive us crazy. She wants to go to school. But we think it's because all the children are gone. She has no one to play with." Said, "Please let her stay one day." I never went back. [chuckle] So, that–end of that first year. . .

AB: You mean you stayed in school?

EM: I stayed in school. And I was reaching at the end of that school year.

AB: So you were just four years old then?

EM: But he couldn't put me on that role because I wasn't old enough.

RW-N: Is it true that you've always liked school?

EM: Yes! (RW-N: Yes!) Yes, indeed. They thought I just wanted to get up there to play with the children.

RW-N: So school has been very special to you.

EM: Yes, real special. And that's why teaching was so special for me.

RW-N: So, when you're, when you wanted to be a beautician at one point in your life, and your parents and others in your family encouraged you to go to college. (EM: go to college), was being a teacher the second thing, at that point, that you wanted to be? Or did you have to come through that slowly to realize that?

EM: Well, I tell you. When uh, even after I married, all the high school kids would come over. And the [inaudible] stayed at my house all the time. My husband worked second shift, so they would, I'd have 'em, "Now, you got to scrub this floor before you leave." But what they would do, they would come and I'd help them with their lessons. So, it's been a thing for me all along. Even before I started teaching.

AB: So, none of your brothers and sisters followed your father into the ministry?

EM: No, none of them. And all four of my brothers are deceased now.

AB: So, back to when you went to school at three years old. You stayed in school from that point on? (EM: From that point on) When did they actually enroll you?

EM: The, I think I was almost five, nearly going on six, when they actually enrolled

me.

AB: What did they do with you in school, if you already knew how to read and what-not?

EM: [chuckling] I'd help, he'd send me to the board to show the other children how to do the math, and. . . (RW-N: cause you had one teacher, is that right?) all those kinds of things. One teacher.

RW-N: And about how many students?

EM: It was, I'd say about forty, somewhere along there, forty to fifty.

AB: And you're the little girl helping the others. [EM chuckling]

RW-N: And you had the same teacher then from the time you were three until. . .

EM: No, uh, another teacher came up there, later on. Only one teacher though, still. They moved him to Wolfe, West Virginia. Rosewald, they called it then. And uh, another teacher came up there.

RW-N: Now, that was the school that Mr. Holcombe. . . (EM: Mr. Holcombe) Is he, was he the second one who came or he. . . ?

EM: He was there when I started.

RW-N: He was the one when you were very, very young?

EM: Yes, he was what I'd call my inspiration. Because many person wouldn't even fool with me. And I always have, had a deep care for children, because if somebody hadn't seen something in me, I'd probably been out there on the streets. When people see, there's a lot of smart people on the streets with, you know, problems and I often think a lot of times if somebody hadn't cared for me, I'd probably been out there, too. At that time, if you could read when you was four or five, and uh, somebody, they might be a lot of children in the same predicament. But nobody has ever,

you know, a lot of 'em don't. . .

I heard on TV about some child reading early. Last week. And I said, "There's plenty of 'em," but nobody really discusses them until it's too late. And then they've got, they've become discipline problems.

RW-N: So, is that what was very important to you about teaching, that you were taking care of children and helping them develop? Or did you just love to learn yourself? What was special for you about teaching?

EM: Well, helping others like someone cared for me. That was the main thing about my teaching.

RW-N: What kind of teacher were you?

EM: Well [chuckling]. . . I think I was a good teacher, a great teacher to all the children. I mean, if you don't think you are yourself, you're not. But the parents and the children said that.

AB: Were you stern?

EM: I didn't really say it. (AB: Were you a stern teacher?) Sort of, with discipline. But we just had good fun. . .learning together.

AB: Now, Mrs. Miller, you also have served with the city council of Bramwell? (EM: Yes) How did you get into-, involved with that?

EM: Oh, my. [chuckling] (AB: And when did you get involved with that?) Uhm. . .let's see, I think this is my fifth term of running. I won last year. Uh. . .a man by the name of Mr. Sherman Graves, that lived at Freeman, uh, says to me one time, "Why don't you run for the council and all?" I kept thinking about it and thinking about it. But anyhow, I ran. I didn't win. But the next time I ran, I won. So I've been there ever since.

AB: Uh, how long is a term?

EM: Two years.

AB: Was Mr. Graves black or white?

EM: He was black.

AB: How many people are on the city council?

EM: Five.

AB: And were you the first black person to serve?

EM: First black female in Mercer County at that time, when I won the first time. Uh, the Bluefield Daily Telegraph news reporter called me, and he said, "Ms. Miller, do you know you're the first black female?" [chuckling]

RW-N: On any city council?

EM: In Mercer County, yes, to win an election. I said, "Do you know what you're talking about?" [chuckling] He says, "Oh, yes, we have the statistics and all. And we'd like to do a story on you." So. . .they did. But uh, I had never even thought of that.

AB: You were still teaching at the time you ran?

EM: Yes, I was still teaching.

AB: And how has it been?

EM: Well, I have enjoyed doing what I could for the town. I don't have any money, those kinds of things. But in uh, doing what's best for the town.

AB: Do you feel a part of the town of Bramwell, accepted and. . .?

EM: Yes, yes, I really do.

AB: Have you always felt that way?

EM: Yes. I really have. And I think it's because so many of the people know me from teaching

their children.

AB: Did you ever think of moving away from here?

EM: Well [chuckling], not really, no, not really. My daughter wants to move. . .right now. She wants us to move. But uh. . .

AB: Out of Bramwell?

EM: Yes.

AB: Where does she want you to go?

EM: Well, she keeps saying, "Mama, I found a house in Princeton. I found a house in Bluefield." I said, "No, I'm not ready." But uh, but for me, no, I mean, I'm satisfied.

RW-N: Because your community is here, in terms of working for it.

EM: It is. My church and everything.

RW-N: When I was listening to you at a lot of different times, uh, you told about your life, you painted a picture to me–you went to black schools, there was lots of segregation in like movies, right? Uh, and it seems that you were living very much in the black community. And yet, you say you have always felt comfortable here in part of the community. Can you explain that better to me? Because when I hear you, it seemed like you were off in the black community, and yet, you clearly work in the whole community. How do you make those connections?

EM: [chuckles]

RW-N: I mean, later on, of course, the schools became integrated, right? (EM: Exactly) But it seemed in your early days you certainly grew up in the black community with a lot of segregation. And yet you feel like you belong to the whole community.

EM: Well, I do. I don't know. . . . Maybe my thinking and my way of life has always been like

that. I have never, although I might not have had the opportunity to prove it, to sit where others sit. And to do, you know, what the other race was doing. But nevertheless, I always felt that I was somebody.

RW-N: Where do you think you got them from?

EM: [chuckles] Well, my parents and my teachers and. . . . I don't know of any others.

RW-N: Where else it would have come from.

EM: Right. Uh, do your best, regardless. . . My parents always said, "You do your best. Treat people right." And some day, there'll be a difference. That difference has come.

AB: In these years as you were taking on new jobs, Mrs. Miller, running for council and all, how'd your husband feel about all those things that you were doing?

EM: [chuckle] He really. . . I don't know. . .in one sense, I do know. Because, like campaigning and all, he'd be out there, passing out papers, cards or whatever.

AB: So he has supported you as you. . . .

EM: He supported-, my whole family supports me. In everything. I couldn't do the things that I do if they didn't.

RW-N: Can you tell us a little bit more about your husband? Uh, we don't know his name. (EM: Oscar) His name is Oscar, like your son. And do you know when he was born?

EM: March the 31st, in '21, 1921.

RW-N: And let's see, we do know that he was in the service. (EM: Yes) And what kind of work has he done over the years?

EM: Well, he was a miner, worked in the mines. He was in the service, first. And he had a job working in the mines. Mines worked out, he went to the Greenbrier.

RW-N: And then he came back when you came back. Is that right, or did he stay at the Greenbrier?

EM: Well, he came back while I still worked over there, got a job at the bus terminal, working for Trailways. (RW-N: Here in town?) Yes, in Bluefield. Then he went back to the Greenbrier and that's where he retired.

RW-N: Oh, he retired from there? (EM: Mmm-hmm)

AB: When did he retire?

EM: Oh, how many years? I'd have to ask him. (RW-N: Before you did?) Oh, yes, mmm-hmm, way before I did. He's been retired about fifteen to seventeen years.

RW-N: So he was a commuting husband, right? (EM: Yes) I mean, because that's. . . well, it's not too far from here, is it?

EM: But he stayed over there.

RW-N: He stayed over there, yes.

AB: What about his parents? Were they from this area, too?

EM: Uh, his mother was from Kentucky. Russellville. And his father was a barber, in Gary, I think. He was born in Anawalt, West Virginia. (RW-N: Uh-huh)

AB: And did he have brothers and sisters, too?

EM: One sister, that's all; there's two of them.

[long pause]

RW-N: We're not out of questions, but we have. . . you've been very easy to talk to. Because you keep it organized, so you've really told us about a lot of things.

AB: Oh, I know what I wanted to ask. Did you join a sorority while you were in college?

EM: Uh, I didn't. I joined, went in the pledge club on campus. But I didn't join the sorority fully until after.

AB: What'd you join? AK?

EM: Delta.

AB: I saw you in that red; I'm a Delta, too; I saw you in that red.

EM: How about that? Okay. [laughter]

AB: And are you active now?

EM: I served as president four years, and just went out last month.

AB: What about other social organizations? Do you belong to others, as well?

EM: Uh, oh, my goodness. The lodge and Masonic League, you know.

AB: Is your husband a Mason?

EM: No, no. Uh, my father was.

AB: Was you all connected with King Hiram? (EM: King Hiram, yes, indeed.) I want to see that building. Is it. . . ?

EM: It's down the track, uh, when you came down off the exit, instead of turning, bearing to the right. No, you've got to go up on the highway now because they uh, removed that bridge. Oh, no, you can't go that way. I was just thinking. Uhm, you'd have to get back on 52 and turn to the left.

AB: Towards Bluefield? (EM: Yes) Turn towards Bluefield?

EM: Yes, uh-huh, down at Simmons.

RW-N: We can look that up, if you'd like to, but I'd like to know what it is. [EM chuckling] What are we talking about here?

EM: Lodge, talking about the lodge building.

RW-N: A special lodge building or one that. . . .

EM: Yes, that was the, King Hiram was the oldest.

RW-N: King?

EM: Hiram, H-i-r-a-m. That's the oldest lodge in the state of West Virginia. The building and all.

RW-N: The building or the lodge, or what?

EM: The lodge, the lodge is, I know. And the building's been down there ever since I can remember. (RW-N: Do you still use it?) Not. . .not at the present.

RW-N: Now that's a Masonic lodge?

EM: Masonic. Now the male department is; of course, the male department's everywhere, down. . . .but it's still, the building is still down there.

AB: Is this the Eastern Star that you're with?

EM: Eastern Star, yes. I'm the Grand Associate Matron.

AB: Oh, okay. And are there other organizations, then?

EM: Oh, my.

AB: We got the city council, we got the Deltas, we got the Eastern Star, we got your church.

EM: I go to so much, it's unbelievable. My house would be glad if I stayed at home. [laughter] I'm trying to think. I guess that's enough. But I think I might belong to something else. I'm trying to think right now.

AB: What about your daughter? Does she ...belong to any of those things, too?

EM: She's uh, no, she's sports-inclined. And uh, she coaches and all those kinds of things,

but...she's a Delta, but she's not active right at the present. She's not been since she finished school. (AB: Mmm-hmm) Now she helps with uh, she belongs to Civitan and she's real active with that. Because they do a lot for handicapped children, too.

AB: Uh, do you teach Sunday School or anything like that?

EM: I'm the Sunday School superintendent.

RW-N: Well, keep asking questions and it will come out! [all laughing] Do you uh, have you always participated in a lot of community things, or have you done more of that as your children have become older?

EM: Well, I participated very little when they were real small. I belonged to like the lodge and different things. But as they become older, I became more active. But in church, they could all go to church with me, so....that's where I did most of my work then.

RW-N: And when you were-, when they were in school, and you were teaching during some of those years, uh, did you belong to PTAs and those kinds of things?

EM: Oh, mercy. Well, I just came out of PTA president. Don't ask me how I do all those things. [chuckling]

AB: Were your kids involved in clubs like Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, anything like that?

EM: Uh, no, not Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts.

AB: Uh, beyond sports, you said your daughter has always been interested in sports. Were they in the band or majorettes or ...?

EM: Oh, they were in the choir and all those kinds of things in school. All of them.

AB: Did they—do you think they had (EM: band) a good experience, socially and what not?

EM: I think they did, yes.

AB: Is there any interracial dating that goes on among the high school kids here? Mrs. Miller is shaking her head yes. [laughter]

EM: Oh, I forgot you want me to talk. [chuckling] Yes.

AB: How is that accepted in the community?

EM: Well, that's the one thing the community has never really accepted.

AB: Is that the black community or the white community?

EM: Both in, but it's happening. [chuckle] –regardless.

RW-N: It's happening now, is that right? (EM: Yes) And so, families are dealing with it individually (EM: individually) when it happens, right?

EM: Mmm-hmm. (RW-N: Have you had...) Well, that was the one thing about me, when they first integrated, I've got-. I'll tell you these two instances. Uh, when they first, the high school integrated, okay. I heard them talking about the white boys going up the track with the black girls. So I uh, I said, "Well, I'm gonna see for myself." So sure enough one evening, when I carried one to practice, and went down, there they were going up the tracks. So I called one of the little girls, not little girls, they were high school. I said, "Do you really know what you're doing?" And she looked at me and she says, "Yes." I said, "Well, I'll tell you, let me tell you this. If he will take you to his home, he's worth fooling with." They said, "Thank you, Ms. Miller," and uh, they never said anything bad or anything. You know, sometimes, some children will tell you where to get off and where to go. But that broke that up, really.

AB: Obviously they wouldn't take them to their homes.

EM: No. [chuckling] I mean, it's worth it if it's going to be all the way. But not just to have fun. Really.

AB: Was it...

RW-N: But you said you had another story, too, that you were—you had two of them?

EM: Yes. With my daughter. [laughing] Uh, my neighbors next door that lived over there then, uh, some of the white boys came up to play with her girl and my daughter. So I said, "Come in Karen." So the lady accused me of being prejudice. I said—it's black, this is two black families now. I said, "No, I'm not prejudice." She says, "Well, why did you call Karen in?" I said, "If Carl and Oscar can go down there and play with his sister, then he can play with Karen." She says, "Come on in Donna Gail." [laughing] Carl was her son, you know, and Oscar was mine. So, it was things like that, you know. I'm serious about that. Always have been. It's okay if it's for real. But if it isn't...

AB: Do you say that to include your white colleagues?

EM: Yes, yes indeed. (AB: You'd be that frank in talking with them?) Yes. I'm that way down at the council, too. I'll never forget some of those kinds of things. We had to make a decision to one time that was best for the whole community. And the next council meeting here comes all of these people in, you know. They didn't like it, the decision that was made. So they all tried to shift it off on the mayor. I says, "Now, there's no way in the world I can go home and go to bed and go to sleep, knowing that they have shifted this all on them." So, way down the line, I finally said it like it was. I thought maybe the next election that I wouldn't be up there. But I almost beat out everybody. I did. [inaudible] So standing up counts, when you think it doesn't.

RW-N: The council that you're on represents the town, right? (EM: Yes, the whole town of Bramwell) What is the proportion of black people in this town?

EM: Very, very few. (RW-N: It's very small) It's small. (AB: Now, as I can recal...) It used to

be a larger number but it isn't.

AB: But the black people lived in Freeman? For the most part? I mean, they didn't live right in Bramwell?

EM: No, no, never, never, never has.

RW-N: But it's all called Bramwell?

EM: All called Bramwell, the Freeman area. And the Coopers.

AB: And Freeman and Coopers were the areas where black lived?

EM: Yes.

RW-N: And is that still true today?

EM: Uh, there's been some families that moved down there, but they moved out. They didn't stay down. . .

RW-N: You mean some white families? Black families?

EM: Black families. Now, I have white over here. . . used to have there. There's a black family living there now. And it's that way over on the other side.

RW-N: So it's more or less the patterns of where people lived (EM: Where people lived) have stayed a lot alike?

EM: Well, it used to be all black, up in this area. But now it's changed. (RW-N: Not as much)

AB: Now, these were company houses, Mrs. Miller, that you all were able to buy when the mines uh, (EM: Yes) stopped working?

EM: Stopped working, when the company sold out, they sold the houses.

AB: Uh, when we talk about integrated schools and integrated neighborhoods, and the town as well, was there ever any racial violence, in your memory, even–not in the last few years–but even

going back beyond that? Do you. . . ?

EM: Uh, there was down in Bramwell, one incident. This wasn't school and it wasn't community. It was one black boy that liked a white girl over in Bluewell, and it was something like that. She liked him. Now, that's the way it was. And there was going to be something, an incident, and his uncle came down the road with two guns, and everybody went home.

AB: And there was never no. . . ?

EM: Never, no.

AB: And when the girls were integrating, there was no fighting and what-not among blacks and whites?

EM: Cats and dogs will fight. And it doesn't really have to be racial all the time. But sometimes you have some incidents.

AB: As a graduate of Bluefield State, how do you feel about what's happened over there in the last thirty or forty years?

EM: I feel awful. I think it's ridiculous, because Bluefield State is a historical college, black historical college. And the way that things have happened over there, in the way of the faculty, as well as the students, the, if you eliminate fields, you know, educational fields, there's no reason for them to be there. So, the process of elimination goes both ways: faculty and students. It's awful, for it to be a historical. . .black college. And it seems like to be it's continuing on.

AB: Though I did hear that they had hired, wasn't that. . . .

RW-N: Mrs. Holland's son has been hired for something, hasn't he? [EM chuckling] You don't think that the college is going to change much? That's what you were [inaudible].

EM: That isn't change. Change is presidents, vice-presidents, faculty members. He's on soft

money. I'm talking about hard money.

AB: Mmm-hmm. You're talking about more permanency. (EM: Permanent, yeah, permanency)

EM: And some of the uh, majors back in, you know, subjects.

RW-N: So you're saying that some of the, some of the major fields of study that they eliminated also eliminated some more of the black students, right? (EM: Yeah) Like education? (EM: Education) Education, is that eliminated now, out of there, completely?

EM: Almost (RW-N: Almost) a lot of it.

RW-N: A lot of it. So that, so that fewer black students will come?

EM: Right, like music, it's out completely. (RW-N: Yes) Uh, high school teachers. I don't think any-, you have to go somewhere else now if you want to be a high school teacher.

RW-N: So would you have liked, would you have liked Bluefield to develop more like WV State College at Institute (EM: Oh, yes, oh, yes) where they kept the black administration. . .(EM: They have kept). And they have mostly white students. But they still center more around [inaudible].

EM: Still centers more about the historical part of it. Now had it been the other way years ago, well and good. That's fine. It seems like to me there is a push out for blacks. [telephone ringing] meetings and everything. Well, they make you feel, make you think that everything, you know, they're welcoming you and try to but. . .

RW-N: But you don't feel it's for real? (EM: No) [chuckle] That's not on my tape, my tape has ended [RW-N speaking about her taping machine]. (EM: Okay) [chuckling] But of course, we have heard other people say. . .

EM: No. And it's nothing but a cop-off. They're just waiting and continuing. I marched with uh, '98 graduating class. I think I counted about fifteen blacks. Now fifty years from now, do

you see what it will be?

AB: It won't take fifty years.

EM: No, no, it won't take fifty. No, it's gonna take about. . .

END OF TAPE 1 - SIDE 2

END OF FIRST INTERVIEW

BEGIN TAPE 2 - SIDE 1

RW-N: . . . Today is July 9th, 1998. We're in the home of Mrs. Edris Miller in Bramwell, West Virginia. Doing the interview is Ancella Bickley and me, Rita Wicks-Nelson.

AB: Mrs. Miller, you said you were a Delta, right? (EM: Yes) Did you join the sorority when you were at Bluefield State or in a regular chapter?

EM: No, in graduate-, I joined in the graduate chapter.

AB: Now, is there, how does that chapter work here? Does it go through several counties or to just a single county chapter?

EM: Uh-huh, it's primarily three counties: McDowell, Mercer and Tazewell counties.

AB: What about your daughter? Was she at all interested in....? I haven't been able to get mine interested. [laughs]

EM: She went in Beta Pi on the campus, when she attended Bluefield State. But she isn't active right at the present.

RW-N: Is Tazewell county in Virginia?

EM: Yes, just right across a mile up the road.

RW-N: But it's actually Virginia, right? (EM: Yes)

AB: I think you told us that you were the oldest child in your family. (EM: Yes) [EM chuckling]

And were you the only one in the family-, I think there was another sibling that went to-, started college, but chose not to finish?

EM: Correct, yes, my sis-, one of my sisters went to Bluefield State.

AB: Uh-huh. And the others were not interested?

EM: Uh, well, my brothers, three of my brothers went in the service (AB: Mmm-hmm) as soon as they finished high school. That was the one thing.

RW-N: Was that during World War II?

EM: That was during '40-, '50 (RW-N: That was the late '40's?) Uh-huh, late '40's and 50's, they were in. (RW-N: Yes)

AB: I notice that you are wearing a family reunion shirt. Robinson, Smith, Henry and Webb families. Is that on your side or your husband's side?

EM: On both sides. The Robinsons, my mom, Henry is my father.

AB: And Smith and Webb?

EM: Well, Smith's my father's, grandfather's relatives, and Webb's my grandmother's.

AB: Do you all have an annual reunion?

EM: Every two years.

AB: Is this the year?

EM: No. Next year.

AB: Next year. About how many people come?

EM: The first one was the great one, it was around 125-, 30. And every since then it's been say anywhere from 90 to 100.

AB: That's still a lot of people.

RW-N: How long have you been doing that?

EM: Uh, we started-, this is our-, for about 10 years now, every two years.

AB: And where? That has Princeton. [apparently referring to EM's shirt] Where do you meet generally?

EM: Bluefield or Princeton. We were in Princeton this particular year, because we couldn't get reservations in Bluefield; horse show and several big things going on that week.

AB: And how far away are your relatives? Do they come from great distances?

EM: Oh, my, from Boston, Massachusetts, all the way-, they get to ride a bus and pick up all along the way. (AB: Well, that's a wonderful idea) New York, Connecticut—Bridgeport, my sister's at Bridgeport, Connecticut. My cousins, my aunt's children.

RW-N: You mean they rent a bus (EM: Yes) and start out and pick up people along the way?

EM: Start out, yes. (AB: That's a wonderful idea) Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York and come on to Baltimore, Philadelphia, Baltimore.

RW-N: So, so they have fun themselves on the bus picking up people. . .

EM: Oh, yes, they enjoy that because they get a chance to really (AB: It's on the way down) get together and chat. And on the way back. So it's good for them.

AB: Has anybody uh, does anybody keep a record of who comes and where they're from, you have all of that?

EM: Yes, yes, we have records of all that attend.

AB: Do you do the organizing every year?

EM: [chuckling] Part of it. No, I have some more, have some, they're from different states; they help.

AB: Uh-huh. Do you all keep in contact through the year? I mean, do you send cards or letters or families. . .

EM: Yes, we uh, talk to each other every now and then by telephone, like holidays and every now and then, just talk.

AB: That's wonderful.

RW-N: Now, your husband's family, I remember that you said you met him because he visited his grandparents who lived next door to you. Uh, was-, did he-, was he raised around here? Did he go to school around here?

EM: Uh, he was in, what county was that? Near Williamson (RW-N: In West Virginia?) In West Virginia, yes. He was born in Anawalt (RW-N: Oh, yes, I think you did mention that.)

RW-N: And did he go to high school then, in other towns?

EM: Other place, yes.

RW-N: He did not go to college, right? (EM: No, no) Yes.

AB: Do you have a high school reunion here? I, my friend was just in town because uh, Excelsior over in McDowell County was having (EM: In Charleston, yes, in Charleston) a reunion in Charleston. Did you go to one of the high schools here?

EM: Bluestone (AB: Bluestone. And did Bluestone have a reunion?) Last year. They have it every two years. (AB: Uh-huh, we're doing ours in Huntington every two years now) In Huntington? (AB: Mmm-hmm, yes) Well, they started going from place to place. Then they decided let's come back. So every year now they come back to Bramwell, and they have it in Bluefield, stay at a hotel.

AB: Gary district is meeting--was the 4th of July, but they were in Washington, D.C. I don't

think they come back to Gary any more. (EM: Ohhh) They move around.

RW-N: Can I ask you a little bit more about your grandparents? (EM: Well, if I know it.) It seems that you, it seems that you did talk to us about them. It seems like there's one grandmother that perhaps I don't think I heard much about. Now, one of your grandparents came, one of your grandmothers came from Virginia, right?

EM: Yes (RW-N: And what....?) uh, as a matter of fact, both of them probably came. But I do not know my grandmother on my father's side.

RW-N: Okay, that's the one that I felt I didn't know. Is that because of death? (EM: Death, yes) So she was already passed. She already passed when you were a child (EM: When I can remember my grandfather) or remember, yes, yes.

EM:...and he had remarried. But uh, I didn't know her.

RW-N:: Okay. I want to skip to this before I forget it. What is your street address here?

EM: Uh, they call this Spencer Street.

RW-N: Spencer.

EM: And now the town-, I think the, they're getting ready to give it another name. Fletcher. So you can put Fletcher in parentheses.

RW-N: Do you know why they're changing it?

EM: Well, they're trying to get the state, the county to take over. Some of these streets, when the weather gets bad. And on the map they are calling it Fletcher. (RW-N: I see)

AB: Uh, this, is this Freeman?

EM: Bramwell, Coopers. This is Coopers. Now, you passed Freeman when you either cross the bridge or....

RW-N: There's a post office there, right? That says Freeman on it.

EM: Freeman. It's no longer in existence. But that is Freeman. (RW-N: Yes)

AB: So now, did black people traditionally live in Bramwell proper or did they live in Coopers or Freeman?

EM: Mostly all on this road from here, one mile down the road, was black, all the way down, almost. Few white lived down near town. But it was all black. Right here, this area. And white lived over across the bridge in that area.

AB: But there were no black people who lived in downtown Bramwell?

EM: No, not in the main town, the main part of the town.

RW-N: And we asked you, I think in passing the last time, about Ann Spencer, the poet. **EM**: You mentioned her, yes.

RW-N: Do you know anything more about her, where she lived? Because she lived here as a child, as I remember.

EM: She lived with uh, some people by the name of Dicksey, Turner Dicksey. (RW-N: Dicksey?) Dicksey. His name was Turner Dicksey.

RW-N: I think she, when I heard a story of her once, her biography, I believe that she came here with her mother—and I could be wrong–and perhaps lived with someone else here. Or maybe an aunt…?

EM: Well, they might have been related to her. (RW-N: Yes) That's the main...related. [overlapping voices-inaudible]

RW-N: But, but there's not much recognition of her in town. I know....what got me thinking about this was that this is called Spencer Street.

EM: We were working on something. We were really getting ready-, the fellow that was getting ready to get into that is deceased, Bob Barnett.

AB: Is he deceased?

EM: Oh, yes. (AB: When?) Ah...its been over a year now. (AB: Really?) Oh, yeah. (AB: I did not know that.) He lived in [inaudible]. . . just before you cross the bridge.

AB: He was the editor of the paper?

EM: Yes, yes. (AB: My, I did not know that) Aristocrat, the Bramwell Aristocrat..

AB: Mmmh. I'm sorry to hear that.

EM: Yes, indeed.

RW-N: Well, you know perhaps, that a woman does the Ann Spencer character in the Chatauqua series. You know the Chataugua series, (EM: Yes) where they pretend they're a particular character. And I have heard a woman do that. Do you know who she is, Ancella?

AB: Yes, Brucella Jordan.

RW-N: Brucella Jordan does it. And I heard that once, and that's why I learned a little bit about Ann Spencer. So she is another person who knows a lot about Ann Spencer, if anyone wanted to learn. It seems a shame that it gets lost, that something special [audio difficulty due to dog barking loudly in background].

EM: But I think we're still going to do something. But we don't really know how much Bob had started, how much work he had done. (RW-N: Yes)

AB: Who took over the paper?

EM: There is no paper now.

AB: Oh...oh, that's really too bad. That's a loss.

EM: [inaudible] it went all over. American people that lived in Bramwell subscribed. And they had an opportunity to keep up with activities that was going on.

AB: Mm-hmm. Uh, you had been on the city council for how long, Miss Miller?

EM: Ever since '87.

AB: And would you tell us again how you got into that? I find that really very interesting. **EM**: Uh...a man by the name of Sherman Graves is the one that encouraged me to serve on the council. He said uh, "You would be good," told me I would be good for the council.

RW-N: Is he a neighbor? Or is he...?

EM: He lives in-, he's deceased now. He lived in Freeman.

RW-N: Would you spell his last name for us?

EM: Graves, G-r-a-v-e-s.

AB: Now, was he black or white?

EM: Black, he was black. And he was on the council at that time. But I ran. I didn't win. [chuckle]

RW-N: Right. You told us you had to-, you ran the second time. (EM: The second time) Why do you think he asked you to participate in that?

EM: Well, he thought...tell me that...I shouldn't just, I should make some type of contribution with what I have. And I didn't consider myself having anything. (RW-N: What do you think...) To offer.....

RW-N: What do you think he saw?

EM: Uhm...well, he never really did completely say. But he just told me I would be good.

RW-N: Had you been speaking out in the community in any way?

EM: Well, yeah, sort of. [chuckle]

RW-N: Can you tell us about that?

EM: A few things.

RW-N: Mrs. Miller is smiling and shaking her head.

AB: She's very modest.

RW-N: She seems modest. [chuckling] Can you tell us anything about that?

AB: Were you questioning anything about roads or street lights or anything like that? Schools?

EM: Oh, schools and uh...better things for people. I mean, equality.

RW-N: How had you been doing that? I mean, were there certain town meetings or organizations?

EM: Well, most of the time I would be talking to him about different things, you know.

RW-N: So you hadn't done very much publicly?

EM: Not, not too much. Not with that, no.

RW-N: But he saw that you had an interest and some ideas, perhaps? Does that sound like it could have been that?

EM: I think that's he uh. . .thought.

AB: And how have you found your time there? Did you feel that you, the things you shouldn't talk about as a member of the city council, or do you just wade in and say whatever's on your mind?

EM: Well, I wade. And uh, weigh out everything and make sure that I'm halfway right, you know, before. And uh, the last thing was this street up here. They was getting ready to ask the state and local county government to help because it's so expensive in the winter with the heavy

snow for the town to pay for all this, you know.

RW-N: This is a small street right in front of you?

EM: Yes, yes. And this one wasn't included on neither side. So I was determined that we'd be included.

AB: That you would get some snow removal and what-not? (EM: Yes)

RW-N: So how did you do that?

EM: Well, when the discussions came up and all, the list was out. And our streets were not listed. So, I was persistent and determined.

RW-N: So did you speak out at the city council?

EM: Yes, at the council. This was all in council meetings. (RW-N: Yes) So they're included. [chuckles]

RW-N: So you'll be happy this next winter, huh? (EM: Yes) That's good.

AB: Did uh, I don't remember whether we asked, Mrs. Miller, but is there an NAACP chapter here?

EM: In Bluefield. (AB:In Bluefield) In Bluefield. There used to be one here during the time Sherman Gray lived. They had one here. But now it's all combined, even Princeton people belong to the Bluefield.

AB: So it's just one chapter now?

EM: One chapter.

AB: Have you been a member of that?

EM: Yes. (AB:For a long time or...), [inaudible]. . . It should have been paid years ago, all these years, you know, you just go, year in and year out, paying. And it could have been 25, 30 years

ago. I could have been a lifetime member. Never thought about it.

RW-N: Have you been active in that organization?

EM: Not in the last three or four years. But I do work. (RW-N: You had been?) Yes, I do help some. But not real active. [phone ringing in background] My son. . .we needed some transportation.

RW-N: We just turned the recorder on after a telephone call that had come from Mrs. Miller's son. I'm not sure where we were.

AB: We were talking about the NAACP, and Mrs. Miller was telling us that there was a single chapter which serves three areas and that Mr. Graves, I guess, had been very active with it. (EM: Very active)

RW-N: So right now when they ask you to help out, you will do it, the last year years, (EM: Yeah) but you're not very active. Back in the days that you were very active, what were you doing?

EM: Serving on committees and whatever was up, or the issues or anything. Not only...

RW-N: Were you very active during the 1960's and into the '70's, during the heyday of the civil rights movement?

EM: Well, some. (RW-N: Some?) Some.

RW-N: Did you ever go to the marches in Washington? (EM: No, no) anything like that?

EM: Now, they did. A lot of them. But I didn't. (RW-N: Yes)

AB: Did anybody from here go to the Million Man marches, as far as you know?

EM: I think some out of Bluefield went. But nobody in this particular area.

RW-N: You're talking about the recent...(AB: Two years ago)...two years ago.

RW-N: Well, that's what I mean. You know, if anything is uncomfortable... I was responding to your smile and you—we'd like you to talk about these things only to the extent that you feel comfortable.

EM: So many times, you know, in Washington when uh, uh, they want to, next week they can go back and pick things up that you've said.

AB: I understand, I understand that.

RW-N: Might you talk about some of the good things that you see that's happened? You said there was some good, some bad.

EM: Well, the relationship in some ways, are much better.

RW-N: Do you think there's any progress in jobs? I mean, like would the five and ten today be different, in terms of...?

EM: [inaudible]

RW-N: Things are economically more...

AB: Do you shop over at that Mercer mall that we passed coming in?

EM: Every now and then.

AB: And do you see black faces over there in the stores? I've not seen [inaudible].

EM: Some of them, yes. In some of them. Yeah, most of them have, some work [inaudible]. . .

AB: When I have talked with people down in Fayette County, for example, about the mines, and uh, the difficulty that black had-men-becoming supervisors or mine inspectors and so on in the mines, it took years for that to happen. Has any of that happened up around this area? I mean, were blacks able to move into supervisory positions?

EM: Well, way back there was some men here in Coopers that would, had big jobs in the mines.

AB: Uh, was there much community discussion of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement and all that was going on uh, during that time?

EM: Yes. Martin Luther King would just, you know, be talked everywhere, mostly. It was quite a bit, because he was trying real hard to do his best for most people, not just a race or anything. He spoke out. He was for all that needed to be taken-, helped.

AB: Was there any particular activities that took place in this community to integrate anything, whether it was a department store or dime store or drug store, or school, anything like that? Did you all have to take any kind of action here?

EM: Well, not too much, not too much. It's when the integration came, the only thing that we couldn't understand, was like the five and ten cent store in Bluefield, if you are white, you could still be in high school and get a job. And the people they hired-black- were college graduates. That was one thing. But uh, I think the change was done–it wasn't any violence or anything like that in the schools around in this area. [inaudible]

RW-N: How do you see things right now? In terms of race relationships or opportunities for black people?

EM: Both ways. Some good, and some not so good.

RW-N: Can you...?

EM: Some looks like it's going right back.

RW-N: Tell us...can you tell us a little bit about what you see is good and not so good? The not so good is that it's reverting back to the way it was? This is your tape, so you can say what you like on it. [EM laughing]

EM: Yes, but they can use things against you years later. [chuckling]

(RW-N: A long time ago?) A long time ago.

AB: You men before integration?

EM: Oh, yes. (AB: Oh, really?) Yes, indeed.

AB: You mean jobs like supervisors and....(EM: Yes)... And that, there was no difficulty with that?

EM: None. None. No, these men were getting the work done. And the people that owned it made the money, so, no.

AB: Were they supervising all black crews or just everybody? (EM: Everybody) An integrated crew.

EM: Everybody. But that's the only place. (AB: That's unusual) Because it's most unusual now for a black man to become a principal in schools, you know. It's still...

AB: Do you have any black teachers left down this way?

EM: Uh, we have one, one black teacher. And you know, that's the big change. Because when we were in our own school, everybody there was black. And likewise in the other schools, the white schools. They were all, then, the dwindling down came in the direction of the black race you know. And I mean it's down, like, like a peace, having somebody black just to say we've got somebody.

RW-N: Is there uh, is there conversations within the black community about the need for young people to go into teaching, because it's needed? Is the idea of raising the race, kind of—I picked up that expression a long time ago–is there...?

EM: Well, there is a reason and there is discussion. But so many of them are not able to go away, away to become teachers. But when Bluefield State had the fields open, there would be a

lot of young people from all the counties in this area going to school.

AB: So you think that the changes that have occurred at Bluefield State has had an impact on your area?

EM: A big impact, yes, indeed, big time. And you see, there isn't too much for them, like if you're in engineering and nursing and they only take so many, you know, in those fields each year.

AB: So the opportunities have changed?

EM: Yes.

RW-N: We haven't talked a lot about-, we've talked on and off about race, but we haven't talked much about what is the meaning of being a woman and the expectations of being a female versus a male.

EM: [inaudible]we don't stand a chance. But we do.

RW-N: Well, that's putting it very succinctly. [laughing] You don't think women stand a chance? (EM: But we do) [EM laughing]

EM: We're surviving. Really, we have more opportunities now. (RW-N: Women have more opportunities?) Yes. Years ago it was thought that you belonged in the home and no place else. And, and it's real hard. And it's hard for a man to be under a woman. (RW-N: You mean like in the work place?) Like in the work place. (RW-N: Have a woman boss?) A woman boss.

RW-N: And why should that be the case?

EM: Well, they think they should be given the uh, you know, orders and everything, you know, men. [laughing]

RW-N: So traditionally, the man has been the boss, and the woman has been under the boss.

(EM: Yes, under, under) When you grew up in your family, uhm, did you grow up learning those traditional roles?

EM: Well, those were the roles, at that time. (RW-N: Right) The male...

RW-N: And do you think that was pretty much...?

EM: [inaudible] . . . the leading roles of the head the family and. . .

RW-N: And so that's what was taught in their family?

EM: I mean, it comes to the point that if... There was eight of us, and if we get to do things, wait 'til your daddy comes home, you know. My daddy never disciplined the way you would-, my mom did. But uh, she...

RW-N: How were the boys treated differently than the girls then, when you were growing up?

EM: Uh, in what, which way...what are you speaking of?

RW-N: Any ways that you can think of. Were there differences? Were there differences in the kinds of work that, the chores that were expected?

EM: Ah, everybody had chores.

AB: Did the boys wash dishes?

RW-N: Did the girls mow the lawn? Work outside?

EM: No, the boys did that. And the girls mostly...[interruption-phone ringing]

RW-N: We turned the recorder off because of the telephone call and we're back. Ancella, do you want to on and make that point?

AB: Well, I was just asking if uh, there was any differences [pause]...any differences between the girls and boys. And I was recalling that in some families, the men ate first and the women served them, and then ate afterwards. And I was wondering if she was aware of anything like that.

EM: No, no, we all mostly ate the same time. But like when we would go to visit my grandfather and grandmother in Bluefield, Virginia, well, all the children had to wait anyway. And it would be so many, my aunts and uncles and grandparents and parents that we would have to wait. Then finally, she had this big long table, everybody, when she got the big long table, everybody could sit down.

RW-N: I recall when I was a child that some incidences would come up where I thought my father was more protective of me than he was of my brothers, watching out for me more. Do you recall anything like that?

EM: Well, they always told me that I was my daddy's, my, you know, usually... I don't know if you had this to happen or not. I sort of favored my father. So they always teased me about that. I was Johnny's child, and I was his [chuckle] favorite. But uh, we still had to do what was right. If we didn't, we got whipping, we knew what was coming.

RW-N: When you said earlier that uh, women sort of always came second uh, how was that the case? That you didn't have the chance–women in general, not necessarily you–didn't have the chance to what, strike out on their own, education...?

EM: Well, they just didn't, they just didn't. They were all respected, the male and the man, you know, and that respect.

RW-N: Did you always think that? Were you always aware of that?

EM: Well, sort of, when I was growing up.

RW-N: Even when you were growing up you were aware of that. Did that bother you at all?

EM: No, it didn't bother me. [chuckles] But some people it does, you know; it did, at that time. But uh, now there's just as many people, females in the work force as it is, more so, some places.

RW-N: And how do you feel about that?

EM: Uh...I don't like to see men sitting around not working. I don't think that's good.

RW-N: You mean letting the women do it all?

EM: Women do it, yes. No, I don't, I don't think it should be that way. I still feel like the man should take his place, along that line.

AB: One thing that my husband often comments about is we see young men taking care of their babies, you see them wearing backpacks practically, or strapped to the front. And that was not a part of what men did when I came along. How do you feel about those kinds of changes?

EM: Well, I still can't accept that, really, I can't accept that. And a lot of single parents now, the fathers get the children in a lot of cases. And I just think it need not to be. That child needs a mother and a female to take care of them. But they survive.

AB: So you still think that there are certain roles that men should perform and certain roles that women should (EM: Should perform, yeah) perform.

RW-N: Are you saying then, that it's proper for women not to be paid much attention to or not to have the opportunities?

EM: Well, they should have opportunities, yes, yes. By all means.

RW-N: But won't those opportunities put them in different roles, having them do different things?

EM: Not where child care is concerned, you know, caring for children. And I still feel like that's the woman's role. Maybe you might not think so. [chuckle]

AB: As a teacher, Mrs. Miller, did you witness many changes in the children over the years, from the time you started teaching until the time you stopped? What were some of the changes that

you saw?

EM: Very much so. Respect was number one, years ago. And as time passed and children changed, different people with children raised different. And they're raised different now than they were back then.

AB: If you had a crystal ball and say what we should do about that, what would you-, what do you think we ought to try to do?

EM: Those are some of the things that should never ever have changed. I really feel like that our country is in the condition it's in because we lose-, when you lose respect for your home, your church and your community, okay, you add up all these communities and you've got the whole United States combined. And when respect and dignity is lost, people change.

AB: Do you see anything out there that will cause people to become more respectful? I mean, what do you think about...what do you think's gonna happen in the future?

EM: I think we should—it's a real hard thing for me to say, but I know that we need to go back to some of the old traditions along that line. I don't say go back to digging with all this machinery and everything. But I do feel like the family needs to really go back to training children with respect and honor and dignity, and accept life, accept mistakes. You know people, children don't want to accept making mistakes any more. And if they do, it's all right. And it isn't.

AB: Is there a role for the church in that, do you think?

EM: Well, the church should play an important role along that line. I feel like the church... But a lot of the people, the children and the people as well—adults, don't attend church. So they do not get that.

RW-N: I want to go back to the family for a minute, because I want to make sure I understand.

When you say to go back to the some of the traditional things or values, perhaps, sometimes in the white community, at least in my generation, the traditional family was that the mother was home all the time with the children. That was probably less true in black families–that a lot of, relatively more black women went out of the home to go to work. At least, if I have read my books properly, that's what history books say. (EM: Yes) So when you talk about the traditional family, you're not necessarily talking about women needing to stay home all the time with their children or are you? 'Cause I, I just don't understand that.

EM: No, they need to teach their children respect and dignity. They-, you can still do that and work. (RW-N: Okay, right) But years ago, in the coal mining areas, very few women worked way back then, very few. Some of them did housework, you know. But it was a very few. Most of them stayed right at home. They really didn't have to.

RW-N: When you were growing up as a child, was that true with most of the families?

EM: Most of the families.

RW-N: The mothers would be home?

EM: Mothers would be home. Now, after my father passed, my mother went to work, as well. But uh, most of, in all these area, mothers stayed at home, most of them.

AB: Uh, now, uh, young women, some of them, are having children at a much younger age than they used to. You find that 14-, 15-, 16-year-old mother in those cases. Do you have much of that here in this community?

EM: At one time, but not as much now, in—about five or six years ago.

RW-N: Is that just because there are few people that age now?

EM: Well, I think they've seen the problems that occurred with other young girls, that they sort

of, they think about it.

AB: When we talk about the homes need to function differently and we need to teach respect and what-not, how do you feel about a 15 year old having a child; who cares for that child, do you imagine?

EM: Well, mostly parents. You know, parents really, the child is a child herself.

RW-N: So you're talking about the grandparents?

EM: Parents, uh, yes, the grandparents. They take care of most of these young; and they help them with them. They're not out there on their own.

AB: So, in this community, there has been support for those girls if they're, if they have children.

EM: If they have children, yes. But very few of them now get in that predicament, very few, in this area.

RW-N: Sometimes I have read and I guess talked to other people about it, too, that black women have had to carry the burden of racism; so have black men, of course. But that it's sometimes said that black women have had a double burden: one is racism and one is being a woman. [EM chuckles] And that has its special burdens, too. Have you ever thought about that, or do you relate to that idea?

EM: Well, it seems like that in most cases, the black woman does have double. So many times it's the black man that's over on the side.

RW-N: Uh, what do you mean by "over on the side"? You mean not participating in some way?

EM: Uh...it seems like the females were favored more for jobs and... Most, not just jobs, for anything. Positions...

RW-N: So that in some way it was easier for them, in that respect? (EM: Easier) But then, of

course, they had to carry the job and had to participate more. [someone speaking in background] So you were saying yes, to some extent, you can see that the black women have a double burden, but then you were also saying that part of that is because black men didn't have the opportunities (EM: right) ;they were pushed aside to some extent (EM: pushed aside) so that gave kind of another burden for women because they had to do more actively. So, do you think it's been harder in your lifetime in general to be a black man or to be a black woman?

EM: A black man. [chuckles] It's hard, harder for them, than it is for the female.

RW-N: Is that different than what you see is in the white community?

EM: Well, in the white community you just see it's either side. It doesn't...I mean, I don't see that, actually, in the white community like it is in ours.

RW-N: So men have greater, white men have greater opportunities? (EM: Yes) Do you see then, if you compare black women's lives with white women's lives, (EM: Oh my) many white women say of my generation, which is pretty much of yours, is of yours, would say that the white women didn't have the opportunities that the white men have had for jobs, for example. Do you relate to that idea?

EM: I...maybe I didn't quite understand you, but I believe what you're saying is uh, to me, I don't see too much of a difference. (RW-N: Between white men and women) white men and white women, yes.

RW-N: That they all have better opportunities? (EM: Oh yes) Okay.

AB: Mrs. Miller, there have been big discussion the last few years about people on welfare and that they-, we should do something about getting people off welfare. Do you have any ideas about that at all?

EM: Well, I think everybody should earn a living for themselves. Some need more help than others. Everybody's not—God didn't make everybody alike. So some are just not able themselves to get out and make a life, you know, for themselves, without some help, counseling and whatever. Welfare is all right in its place. But there's too many—here I go again—male, sitting around getting food stamps and the rent paid with help, good help. That shouldn't be. But if you're ill, if you're sick and uh, that's different. That's what it's there, supposed to be there for. But uh, things happen to anybody. You can have plenty today and nothing tomorrow. You need help. I can remember when uh, my husband worked at the Greenbrier, okay. And uh, they gave stamps to most of the men while they were on strike, but he couldn't get them because I taught school. But he's supposed to be the head, you know. [chuckles] He couldn't get them.

RW-N: And your husband has a long working career, right? (EM: Yes) He worked in the mines once? (EM: Mines) And then he's worked at the Greenbrier (EM: Greenbrier). So when you talk about uh, some of the men not being able to get jobs or maybe not doing what they should be able to do, that hasn't happened in your family very much? Your immediate family...

EM: No, no, most of my people have always worked.

RW-N: And more or less the males and the females, (EM: males and females) in general. But you see that in a larger sense that's going on. (EM: Yes) Do you see. . .

EM: [inaudible]

RW-N: And your philosophy is you should get out and work and take care of yourself (EM: Yes) to the extent that you can.

EM: You should know that you can survive. Everybody. And then there's some mentally--I'm not speaking of people that are not able and capable--there's many people that can't. They can't

make it in the work place.

RW-N: Do you see that, that black women are especially independent or especially strong, compared to...compared to black men, compared to white men or women?

EM: Some. I see some, yes, some. I think that black men could advance more if they'd have enough faith in themselves and just still try to, you know, push forward.

RW-N: You mean the men, black men? (EM: The men. Mm-hmm) And do you think the wom-, the black women have had more of that and have been able to push forward?

EM: More so. I think the black men feel likes, well, just because I'm black, I don't stand a chance. I really feel like a lot of them feel that way. But there is some that's going to push forward and go ahead and advance in life.

RW-N: Why do you think that's the case? Why should black men feel that way more than black women?

EM: Well, it's just been a inferior thing all along. Since slavery time, they were put back.

RW-N: And they just feel that way?

EM: And they—yes! That's what it's all about.

RW-N: But women were slaves.

EM: Well, women always will be. . . [laughing] I mean to a certain extent. I don't mean the slave kind, like-[laughing]

RW-N: Okay. So that it seems less natural for a man not to be able to get out there in the world and lead and do things that women...

EM: It's from that time on. It's been just a barrier.

RW-N: I want to go back to ask you [phone interruption]

END OF TAPE 2 - SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 2- SIDE 2

RW-N: Okay, we're back again after an interruption on the tape. Uh, and I'm gonna ask you to think about yourself when you were a child. (EM: Oh, mercy!) [EM laughs] When you think back in those years, what kind of a child do you think you were? Were you happy, funny, serious, independent, hard to get along with, easy to get along with?

EM: I don't think that I was real hard to get along with. (RW-N: You were not? Were you very easy to get along with?) Well, most of the time.

AB: Did you ever get spankings?

EM: Oh, Lord, yes.

AB: Who did the spanking, your mother or father?

EM: My mom, most of it. My father, he disciplined, but he didn't really do too much spanking.

RW-N: How else do you see yourself as a child or maybe into your adolescent years?

EM: Well, I hadn't really thought about...

AB: Were you the peace maker in the family? If the other children were quarreling, did you have to kind of bring peace between them?

EM: Well, I don't know about bringing the peace. But I was the oldest. And my father was a preacher. And when he'd go to preach, my mom would go with him. So I had to take care of them.

RW-N: Did that make you boss?

EM: That made me the boss! [laughing]

RW-N: Did that make you bossy?

EM: Yes, when it comes to making them stay in the yard and, you know, do whatever.

AB: Did they do what you told them to do?

EM: Yes, most of the time. Most of the time. Then sometimes they, you know, how it goes with sisters and brothers. They decide nobody was going to tell them anything.

RW-N: When you look back on those early years, what do you remember as the best things for you? As a child and into adolescence?

EM: Well...I have to stop and think now. [RW-N: yes] [EM pausing for thought] I really uh, I didn't have no real bad, bad life. So therefore, uh, the family life was great.

AB: What did you do for fun? If you just wanted to have a good time ...?

EM: We played ball. I lived right over on the other side over there where the church is in that area when I was real young. We played ball, played croquet, and (RW-N: Hopscotch, I think you told us last time) hopscotch, yes. Games like that.

RW-N: What do you remember as some of the things that you might have worried about or found hard when you were young?

EM: Uh...[pausing for thought] not too much of anything.

RW-N: How do you see yourself now? Let me jump way forward, we're gonna ask you some questions about...

EM: Just ask! [laughing]

RW-N: How do see yourself now? If you had to come up with four words to try to describe yourself to somebody, what would those words be?

EM: My, my, my. [chuckles] That would be real hard to say for me because I don't know.

RW-N: Let me push you a little bit. Are you a sad person?

EM: Very seldom, very, very, no.

RW-N: So you're not a sad person. Are you a leader?

EM: They say I am.

RW-N: Do you believe you are?

EM: My daughter says I am. [chuckling] I think, I feel like... (RW-N: You feel…) like that I'm a leader.

RW-N: So you're not sad, right. You are a leader. What else?

EM: Well...

AB: Are you curious?

EM: I just don't remember too much about (RW-N: I know you don't. But we're asking you to…)

AB: Are you curious? Do you like to know different things, or go different places or so?

EM: Yes, explore, yes, indeed. I enjoy doing that.

AB: Do you travel much?

EM: When we go away.

AB: Where do you go when you travel?

EM: I've been just about all over.

RW-N: Do you travel mostly in the family, with your husband now?

EM: No, (RW-N: with friends?) no, this is with bowling and conventions, things like that.

AB: What kinds of conventions?

EM: You name it. Delta sorority convention, national. And then the regionals. Okay, we used to bowl, national bowling. So we have very few places, you know. Every year you go to a different

place. And uh, I go to Columbus the last of this month to the Bluefield State reunion, things like that, conventions and...

RW-N: In your organizations, have you been, often been a leader in these organizations? Have you often held offices like the president or secretary or treasurer?

EM: Well, like when I go to national Baptist convention, I'm the president of the district women for our district, Flattop. So, they send me. Don't think I'll go all these places on my own. [chuckles]

RW-N: So you sometimes go, uh-huh....

EM: Sometimes I get to go. Now, when I go bowling, I pay for it myself. (RW-N: Yes) But like sometimes when I go to the sorority, Delta's conventions whether it's national or regional, every now and then I get to be the delegate, so that' s good, too.

AB: Do you go down to Hilltop?

EM: All the time, yes.

AB: And do you go down there as a representative of your local church, or just became you want to go participate?

EM: Some of it's because I want to and I like it. I belong to the state chorus.

RW-N: Why are you asking about Hilltop? That doesn't mean anything to me.

EM: That's a fine place. [chuckling]

AB: Hilltop is the headquarters of the Baptist State Convention. Most of the Baptist churches in this section of the state belong organizationally to it. And they have regular meetings there, educational meetings, where they go and study and ....

EM: Like I taught, in June, a class, Sunday School for 2,000, last month at Hilltop at the

congress, state congress meeting.

AB: How long were you there?

EM: Four days.

RW-N: You said you taught?

EM: A class.

RW-N: What did, what class?

EM: Uh, sunday schools, the prediction of sunday schools in the year 2000.

AB: That sounds interesting.

EM: Boy, it was interesting to me when they called and asked me.

RW-N: And who was in the class?

EM: I said, "I don't know anything about 2000." [chuckling]

RW-N: Who was in the class, adults?

EM: They were all adults, adults.

AB: And these will be people who will go back and teach their own sunday school class. So it was sort of a training uh, (EM: training) session that you...

EM: And I go down in Logan County doing workshops and different things like that.

RW-N: So you're very social? [EM chuckling] Very outgoing and social, at least in your activities.

AB: Do you sing?

EM: I try. I can sing by myself.

RW-N: In your church?

EM: Uh, church, and I belong to the state chorus, West Virginia Baptist State, that's at Hilltop.

That's where our state adult chorus.

AB: You talked about your son being a musician. Does he do religious music or, or...?

EM: He does religious, all religious now.

AB: Do you sing with him?

EM: Uh, no. His wife sings. We sing in the choir together, our church choir. But with all my activities, I can't keep up with that one.

RW-N: Are most of your activities outside of the home? I mean, some women spend a lot of time home knitting or crocheting or making crafts.

EM: Oh, no. I can't sew buttons on my blouse. [laughing]

RW-N: So most of your activities are outside.

EM: I mean, I can sew but I don't have the time.

RW-N: Right. Do you read much?

EM: I read some.

RW-N: What kind of things do you read?

EM: Uh, magazines. And I just took a stack of them out, mostly magazines and books, I read.

RW-N: What kind of books, if you have the time to read books, what kind would they be?

EM: Some are religious and some are uhm just an ordinary novel.

AB: You spoke of the Bramwell newspaper not publishing any longer. Do you all get Bluefield? (EM: Bluefield Daily) Telegraph? (EM: Telegraph. And the Welch paper, we get the Welch paper) Do you all get the Beacon Digest up here?

EM: No, but I think I mentioned it to you. I'm intending to subscribe to it. And I saw an advertisement in one-, some paper, and I intended to get it out to subscribe to it. I have some

friends in Bluefield that gets it. (AB: uh-huh)

RW-N: When you think of yourself as a person, who...

EM: I don't of myself...

RW-N: You don't think of yourself. You just keep going, huh?

EM: My daughter says, "Your people, well, I guess you're going to do something for your people." [laughter]

RW-N: Your people?

EM: I says, "You remind me of that commercial...ah-"

RW-N: Now, your daughter says this to you?

EM: No, I'm telling my daughter that she reminds me, she's always telling me about 'my people'. I told her she reminded me of the commercial where the little girl wants to go to the beach and the mom says, "I got to see my client," and she says, "now, when can I be a client?" I said, "Are you asking me for some time?" [laughing]

AB: [inaudible]

RW-N: Who do you think most influenced you to become the person you are today? (EM: Oh, my) Who were your role models? Who mattered to you in that way?

EM: Actually, my mom, my father, although he died at an early age. But uh, he was always encouraging, you know. He was a musician, too. That's where my son got it from. And he always told me, "I just like cool music," you know, and [inaudible; phone interruption]. You understand what I'm trying to say?

AB: Uh, Mrs. Miller, your father, although he died early, seems to me that he continued to be a presence in your life, although he was deceased. Does that, is that the case? Mrs. Miller's

shaking her head.

EM: Often, I often think of, yes, indeed. Very much so.

AB: So that he wasn't here, didn't mean that he didn't uh, you didn't....

EM: . . .leave a lasting impression of some kind. In many ways. Even, I don't know if I mentioned this to you or not. But when I was small, growing up during that time, my father was sick for a good while. But uh, at that time, they had the hot plates and the irons and you could get into them. And I'd watch him. And when he passed, I did all of that. When they burn out hot plates, I could (AB: You could repair electrical, uh-huh) repair.

AB: From watching your father.

EM: From watching him. Anything around the house. So I guess you see why, you know, it was lasting experiences.

AB: Are your parents buried near here?

EM: Yes, they're buried out at Oak Grove, right out at Welch.

AB: Uh, is that a black cemetery or...? (EM: Black) All black cemetery?

EM: Black cemetery. Well, it's closed now. It's full.

AB: Oh, really? Do you all go to the cemetery to visit the graves?

EM: Yes, yes, we go.

AB: Do you go down [phone interruption] We were talking about your parents and your visiting the cemetery and you said you all go to the cemeteries frequently or at Memorial Day or when?

EM: Mostly Memorial Day now. We used, I used to go in November.

RW-N: What kind of-, what were the decisions that you made that you see as really changing

your life? I mean, let me explain where I'm coming from when I ask you that. I'm a psychologist by training, [EM: inaudible comment and laughing] so I look a lot at women's lives, the path that people take over their lives. (EM: Ohh) And so, I'm asking you when you look back on your life, what were some of the important decisions that really directed your life, had you made them differently, would have been a different life. For example, was going to college, do you see that as really important in your life? And having influence on how your life would turn out?

EM: I've always said that if my father hadn't been a preacher, I'd never been a teacher. I love to dance. (RW-N: Ah!) I think I'd been some showgirl. Really, I'm serious. [laughing]

RW-N: So had your life been different, you might have ended up dancing and being a showgirl?

EM: Yes, indeed. Really, and then, I think another factor, my first teacher, uh, they thought, you know, I was just somebody that just wanted to go to school to have somebody to play with and whatever. But if that teacher hadn't helped me then, I'd be out on the streets. That's another thing, too.

RW-N: So that was important person?

EM: Yes.

RW-N: An important happening that you went to school earlier and met that teacher.

EM: Yes. Because a many a teacher would have said, "No, you take that child back home," and then everybody would have wondered, "What in the world is wrong with her? She stays in trouble, she does this, she does that." I mean, I look at a lot of people now, had they had somebody to really care for them back—and I can go and go and go and go and do; I don't like to do housework though. [chuckle] Really. But I can. I just love it and I enjoy doing for people. Really.

RW-N: You think you've changed much over your lifetime? [EM: Oh!] Have you got—I mean, let me just give you some examples of what people say. Sometimes people say I was very shy when I was young and now I'm not shy. Some people say I did more when I was younger and now I've kind of drawn in more. Some people say, talk about their being dependent and independent; those kinds of things when you think about yourself. How do you think you've changed over your lifetime?

EM: Other than being older [laughing]. But I have changed. I used to, years ago, I wouldn't talk too much. Really, because I did have a little speech problem. Uh, I took care of that myself.

RW-N: What kind of speech problem? Just enunciation?

EM: Enunciation.

AB: When you went to Bluefield State, had you handled that speech problem already by the time you got there?

EM: Yes, yes.

RW-N: So you think when you were younger, that affected how, that made you be more quiet? (EM: Quiet, yes, very much so) Anything else that, that you can think about in terms of how you've changed?

EM: Well, I don't-. As they say, I think about things a lot now. [inaudible]

You know for—like in school. Like if I saw something that wasn't exactly right, [EM chuckling] I'd go, I'd speak out. And as the years, since I became older, I found out that...I shouldn't have [inaudible] so much like that.

RW-N: So you do less of that now, or you do it differently?

EM: I do it differently. I do it differently.

RW-N: How do you do it differently?

EM: Well, I don't know. It just comes, the Lord gives it to me, a better way to approach people.

RW-N: So is it then, are you saying that in, when you were younger and something wasn't right to you, that you wouldn't think about it much, but you would impulsively just speak out rapidly?

EM: Oh, yes, yes, yes. Let me tell you. One time, I don't know if I told you the last time you were here or not. But uh, there was a girl in my room that the kids picked on. Did I tell you about that? (RW-N: I don't think so) They picked on her all the time. (RW-N: You were the teacher in the room?) Yes. (RW-N: uh-huh) And then, out on the playground, anywhere, they would, because she did have a problem, a family problem, some other people, foster, she had foster parents. Okay. I happened to look out the window and I saw the children picking at her. Then, when she gets to fighting, they all go in and tell on her. And I saw what happened. So, when I got to the office, I ran, I was up on second floor. I got over to the office. The principal had the paddle up, getting ready to come down. I said, "Don't you touch her." [laughing] I wouldn't have said a thing. But things that I said like that then, I would, you know, I wouldn't...

AB: Been more cautious about now.

EM: "Don't you dare put your hands on her!"

RW-N: How would you handle that now?

EM: And the paddle went down and he laid the paddle down. So I explained to him what had happened. And not only, uh, the children didn't pick at that girl as much, either. But I saw what happened from the window. They started it. And uh, I see him now. Sometimes...(AB: Does he ever remind you of that?) he looks at me, and he says, "I thank you." Said he could have been in a lot of, you know, problems, with parents and all.

RW-N: Well, in that case, it seemed that your speaking out quickly was good, right? (EM: Well, it paid off that time) paid off. But in other times you think it hasn't paid off?

EM: Well, I think it's always paid off. But then I just wonder after it's over, did I have to do it like that? You know.

RW-N: Oh, I see. So you're asking yourself whether you could be doing it differently?

EM: Yes.

RW-N: And do you, now today, see yourself as doing it somewhat differently?

EM: I still do. (RW-N: You still do that?) yes. But I don't, I'm getting older now, so I'm, I'm not as far out with it. But I still speak, I still really (RW-N: Speak out?) speak out. I might not look like it, I might not act like it, but I do.

AB: You had spoke about your home and the impact that your father being a minister had on you, did you all, were you all allowed to sing the blues or play the blues or so forth?

EM: I played them. I mean, I was taking music. And I went to Bluefield Music Store, scrubbed porch for a lady and she paid me. So the next time I went to Bluefield, I bought "Blues in the Night," the music to it.

AB: And you learned to play that?

EM: Uh-huh. (AB: Was your father still living?) I could learn to play it but my mom wouldn't let me. So I had to [inaudible] "You're not going to play that here in this house," you know. Every time I got a chance I did.

RW-N: You don't play it here in this house?

EM: I said my mom said that.

RW-N: Oh, oh, your mother said that. Right.

EM: My mother. No, my son had a band like that. And uh, I kept telling him God didn't give him that talent for him to play that. I said, "But you have to make that change yourself. It's nothing I can do." But, once or twice they played in Tazewell, Virginia. And the woman didn't give them, pay them right. She didn't deal with them right. So over here at War, West Virginia, they called him, wanted him to play, bring his band over and play for that Saturday night for her place. I said, "You ask her if I can take up the money at the door?" Because he'd rent a van and take all the children and the instruments and all. And he had to pay out of his pocket in Tazewell. I said, "I don't approve of what you're doing. But, I don't approve of people misusing you, either." I said, "Ask if I can take it up? And you can go." So she said, yes, I could. She made her money there with food and other things. And I went and he told me, "I know you're not going." But he decided, you know. So I went. Yes, I did. That was my child.

RW-N: Do you still...do you have any feelings then that blues is bad music, in terms of...

EM: I don't, I don't think so. (RW-N: You don't think so) I don't think so.

RW-N: If I came into your house, and if I could play the piano and I went to the piano and played blues, would that be okay with you?

EM: It'd be okay with me. But it wouldn't have been with my mom. (RW-N: With your Mother, right)

AB: Did they have Silas Green here? Do you remember Silas Green?

EM: Yeah, we used to go all the time, at the ballpark right here just before you cross the bridge, there's a ballpark over there. That's where Silas Green, skating rinks and everything. We skated, too, when we were young.

AB: Did folks object to you going to Silas Green, seeing the dancing girls and whatnot?

EM: No, everybody would go. That's the strangest thing. We couldn't do certain things in the house. But everybody'd go see Silas Green.

RW-N: Now, Silas Green...

AB: Silas Green was a traveling minstrel show. (RW-N: Oh yes) And they would have stage, it was a stage show. And there were always dancing girls that we thought, that was very risquè because they had little short dresses.

EM: All them short colored dresses on and all of that. And they'd always make jokes about some prominent people into town. At that time, there was some people by the name of Prilmans that had the restaurant, it's a black restaurant. And uh, Liza would come in with those drawers hanging out from under her new dress, and her husband said, "Liza, where'd you get those drawers?" And she said, Jacob Prilman bought 'em. He was the prominent man. [laughter] "No, he didn't. No, he didn't." She didn't quite understand the joke. But it was a joke, you know. Oh, yes, we got to go. Most things like that.

AB: You spoke of skating, too. Was that roller skating?

EM: Roll-, roller skating. A man used to come, set up for so many months in all the different areas.

AB: Uh-huh. Now, when that happened, did black kids and white kids skate together?

EM: Yes, yes, indeed.

AB: And there was never any black skated on Tuesday and white people on Wednesday?

EM: No, no, everybody, (AB: Everybody skated the same time.) everybody skated, everybody.

AB: That was not true in Huntington where I grew up. (EM: It wasn't, no)

RW-N: Even when they came from out of town to set it up?

AB: They didn't come from out of town. There were roller skating rinks in town. There were two. (EM: Uh-huh) And uh, we could go. I mean, the only way you could go would be if the church maybe would have a fund raiser, they'd have a roller skating night or something like that.

RW-N: But this was a situation where somebody came from—a businessman came and set it up. (EM: Uh-huh) So they would allow anybody to go.

EM: Everybody skated.

RW-N: Yes. I want to switch gears again. When you uh, think over your life, uhm, what do you think are, that you feel the best about, that you've done in your life? (EM chuckles] The things that you just feel good about having accomplished.

EM: I just wonder if I've accomplished anything. Uh...usually you don't really think about accomplishments.

RW-N: They don't have—and I'm not necessarily (EM: inaudible), I'm not necessarily talking, I mean, they don't have to be fancy accomplishments. Just what are the things that you feel good about yourself, about your family, about the kind of person you've been, about things you might have done in the community, about being a teacher. What are the things stand out in your mind that you could say, "I did pretty good in those."

EM: I..not for me myself. I just never feel like, like...egotistic. But what I'm saying, when I go into the store and run into students that I've taught, it's what they say that lets me know that I couldn't have been too bad of a teacher. And that's what counts mostly. Because most of my life was spent in school, 32 years. So, so many times, I mean, even here last week, I ran into, "You're still my best." We went to shop for the church and some of the church people was with me and they was telling them about, you know, "She's the best, she's the best." "You're still my

favorite, all the way." Things like that, that has really—and that happens quite often , because having an opportunity to teach a lot of children, you just run into them.

AB: These are black and white, that you're seeing?

EM: Black and white, black and white. A lot of white, I always do. I tell it like it is. Really.

RW-N: Do some of your students keep in touch with you?

EM: They do.

RW-N: Let me take that coin and flip it on the other side. (EM: Oh my.) When you think, when you think back, what are some of your biggest regrets about things that you wished that you had done or hadn't done?

EM: Like when the lady called me just now, about my appointment for my nails, I regret—that's a small thing, that I didn't have my nails fixed like that when I was teaching school. I can, that was the last thing.

AB: You enjoy getting your nails done?

EM: Yeah, but I regret, I mean, that's a small thing. But I regret that I didn't do some of those kinds of things.

RW-N: What, what kinds of things?

EM: Like nails (RW-N: You mean like, [inaudible]?)

AB: Fancy yourself a little bit, that somewhere along the way you didn't take the time to (EM: I didn't bother) to do for yourself a little.

EM: Just busy doing for others.

RW-N: And why does that mean anything to you now? You just sort of enjoy it, that it looks nice...? That it makes you feel good about yourself? Something like that?

EM: Yes, yes, it does.

RW-N: What other kinds of regrets might you have? You said that's a little thing. But I don't know if it's very little, but do you have some other regrets? That if you could do it over again, that you would say, "Gee, I wished I had done better here, there," or?

EM: Well, there's a lot of things in life. The older you get, you might say "Well, I wished I had done," you know, "differently." But not too many, because usually I think about things before I really make decisions. I studied more when I was in college. But it's too far past the time. I did fairly good. But uh, I could have applied myself, more.

AB: You came from a big family. Do you ever wish that you had had more children yourself?

EM: Well, I really thought I always wanted to marry a preacher. That didn't happen. And have a whole lot of children. That didn't happen. But uh...

RW-N: Does that matter to you now? I mean, are you sad about that, that that happened?

EM: No, no, it just can't be helped, so. . .

RW-N: When you think of your life, do you think of it as...what kind of pathway has it been? Has it been pretty much this way? Did it go up and down? Did it get better all the time and go up? Did it get worse and go down?

EM: Well, it fluctuates up and down. Life is (RW-N: You see it fluctuating?) strange. If it kept going up, I'd think I was in Heaven. [laughter]

RW-N: So it's gone up and down?

EM: Nothing goes your way in all the time. No, it fluctuates.

RW-N: How do you see...how do you see your future?

EM: Oh, my.

RW-N: How do you think, I mean, how do you think it's gonna be different or is it gonna be different in say five years from now? ten years from now? Do you have any particular kinds of things that you want to accomplish in the next few years?

EM: I've always said now, I'm going to practice my music so I can play better. But that time never comes. [chuckles]

RW-N: So that's probably not going to happen. Do you see yourself as getting any different?

EM: If I would apply myself, I could mentally do better than I do. I hide behind Carl. I play and he plays the organ, I play the piano for the church. But if I just had one hour a day for a month, I, I could really do much better with it. If I miss a note, he's covering it up with the organ. So uh, nothing's perfect.

RW-N: How satisfied are you with your life today? I mean..., you're shaking your head yes.

EM: Fairly satisfied. (RW-N: Fairly satisfied) A few things I could do differently and better, but uh...

RW-N: Is there anything that uh, we haven't talked to you about that we have missed that you have really wanted to tell us about? Sometimes between two interviews we come back and talk the second time and women will say, "Gee, I wanted to tell you more about this."

EM: Well, a week after you left, a lot of things came in my mind, but they've gone now. Age...[laughing] I should have jotted them down...really.

RW-N: Ancella, do you have anything?

AB: No, I don't think so.

RW-N: Are we getting pretty much to the end here?

AB: Yeah, I think we pretty much covered everything that I thought of.

RW-N: You can always, if there is anything, you can always write us a little note. If you don't have addresses, we'll leave them again. I know that you're very busy and I really don't think you're gonna do that. [chuckle] But you might. But you know, if ever you wanted to do that, of course, you have telephone numbers, too. If you ever come across any of your clippings from your newspaper (EM: Okay, I will), we'd love to have those. And I do think you have our address, or my address at least on the letter, or I can leave it with you.

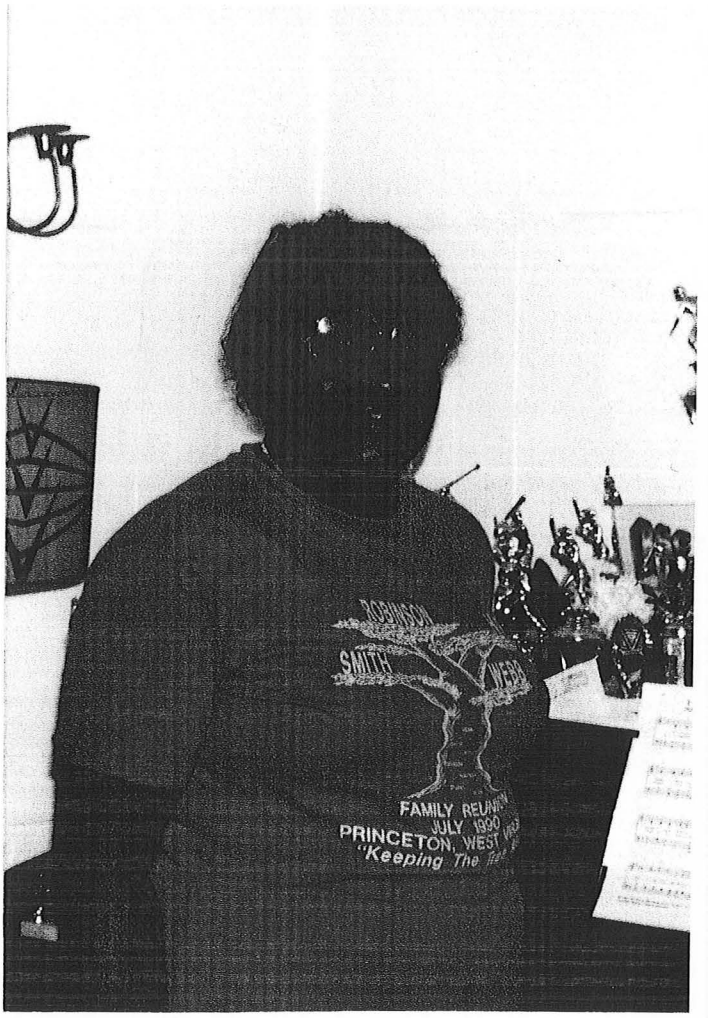
EM: Yes, yes, I have it. I think I do.

RW-N: So we'll turn off the recorder then, if there's nothing else.

END OF INTERVIEWS

Mrs. Edris Miller

Summer 1988



Taken in Mrs. Miller's home
Summer 1998

Summer 1998